

“Powers of misrecognition”: masculinity and the politics of the  
aesthetic in the fiction of John Banville

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the links between masculinity and representations of power in the fiction of John Banville and argues that his use of the category of the aesthetic, especially the sublime, strategically presents the masculine subject as the site of a loss of power, often figured as self-fragmentation or self-delusion. This strategy is particularly evident in Banville's approach to problems of representation, especially with regard to narrating the past, the construction of systems of knowledge, and efforts to achieve or articulate self-presence balanced by an ethical relation to the other. In each case, gender difference and sexual desire act as markers within Banville's key themes as part of the enactment of failure that defines the male protagonist. Existing gender criticism has examined many of the representations of women and femininity in Banville's fiction, but has fully considered neither the ways in which these representations contribute to the construction of the male narrative subject that is the origin or focus of the text, nor the gender politics of the various articulations of creativity and intellectual activity valorised by Banville. Drawing upon Nick Mansfield's work on cultural masochism, the thesis argues that the disavowal of power, or its entanglement in unresolvable dialectics, constitutes a subtle technique for managing power relations, the origins of which lie in the ambivalent relation to power at the heart of subject-formation. Contrary to the view that Banville's fiction directly de-centres or deconstructs subjectivity, it shows that by aestheticising the de-centred subject the fiction works to neutralise difference and ultimately recuperate unity within elastic, even contradictory, narratives of self. Through readings of seven of Banville's novels, it demonstrates that the misrecognitions and ironies that drive his fiction present epistemological and representational failures within an aesthetic closure that asserts itself, paradoxically,

through these very failures to establish closure. Crucially, it is in the language of desire that this paradox is expressed. The thesis concludes that the logic of the sublime enables Banville to dramatise a fragmented masculinity that has lost its basis in traditional representational and philosophical ideals, but that it simultaneously brings about a recuperation and consolidation of the very power structures his writing appears to disavow.

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## List of Abbreviations

### ABBREVIATION

### TITLE

<i>B</i>	Birchwood
<i>DC</i>	Doctor Copernicus
<i>K</i>	Kepler
<i>NL</i>	The Newton Letter
<i>M</i>	Mefisto
<i>BE</i>	The Book of Evidence
<i>G</i>	Ghosts
<i>A</i>	Athena
<i>E</i>	Eclipse
<i>S</i>	Shroud

Which seemed to the host to be the predominant qualities of his guest?  
Confidence in himself, an equal and opposite power of abandonment and recuperation.  
*Ulysses*, 626.

Come, can a man who attempts to find enjoyment  
in the very feeling of his own degradation possibly have a spark of respect for himself?  
*Notes from the Underground*, II.



## Introduction

When discussing the romantic traits of John Banville's fiction, critics have often emphasised its backward-looking, confessional perspective, and to an extent have transplanted this perspective, including its framing of the past either as a beautiful organic whole or as sublime despair, into their own critical discourse. Joseph McMinn's description is exemplary in this regard when he writes that for Banville's protagonists

[t]he past reveals itself only through silent synecdoche, images which belong to, but never explain, the past . . . The compulsive, confessional style of such narratives emphasises their *fatal attraction* to the past, knowing, or hoping, that an imaginative version may yield, or retrieve, some consolatory image of order and beauty out of what is almost invariably a history of violence and chaos (McMinn 1999:5; emphasis added).

Banville criticism has rarely interrogated the gender politics that such a recycling of romantic images implies. McMinn probably does not consciously allude to Adrien Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) here, but the trace of female hysteria or insanity and male entrapment such a reading would suggest indicates how a significant layer of gender politics has been ignored in analyses of Banville's fiction. It may well remind us of figures like the "green girl" in *Doctor Copernicus*, the daughter of Professor Brudzewski, who combines ideal beauty with insanity and references to sexual disease, or of Axel Vander's relationships with women who are mentally unstable in *Shroud*. Frequently, the desire for a "consolatory image of order," or a return to a state of grace in the past, forms a 'trap' into which Banville's protagonists fall, thinking they are

discovering some truth while actually mirroring themselves further in their own ‘misconceptions’. In almost every case, these misconceptions are dramatised through relationships with women, and through the way masculinity is positioned in relation to particular tropes associated with femininity. McMinin’s suggestion that the desire for an harmoniously interiorised image may be “fatal” (like a *femme fatale*) to Banville’s narrators thus introduces questions about the role of gender in Banville’s portrayal of a “compulsive, confessional” masculine subjectivity.

Critical studies of masculinity within all sorts of contexts are now very common – so common in fact that the point of entry into the debate has become a debate in itself. In his preface to *Writing Masculinities* (1999), Ben Knights suggests that it is likely people will ask “[i]s this not a subject which has been sufficiently, indeed abundantly, debated over the last fifteen or twenty years? And in a debate in which the voices of the already audible and privileged can be heard yet again, this time lamenting their audibility and privilege?” (vii). The problem is clear: the position of the (often male) theorist and the social position of white masculinity often remains unchanged despite theoretical critiques, repeated self-examination by men or extended efforts to raise readers’ political consciousness. It is a problem that will be reflected in the approach this thesis takes to Banville’s representation of masculinity.

In *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*, Peter Middleton argues that the trouble with masculinity is that it is often obscured, “caught up in a problem that has names other than masculinity and power, names like modernity and postmodernism” (12). Like Knights, Middleton sees the “political gesture of self-reflection caught in complex theoretical debates,” so that it often seems “every claim, every strategy, every concept is yet more Ulyssean fantasy or addition to the ego bunker” (ibid.). Seemingly alluding to the sublime, Middleton sees “the infinite regress that threatens attempts to write about masculinity” as a problem that studies of masculinity find in their object: a theoretically ubiquitous yet politically elusive subjectivity, that in its relentless self-examination tends to become further enmeshed in fantasies or mythologies of power. The only viable approach, Middleton suggests,

is to make “the gesture of reflexivity itself the subject of preliminary inquiry” (ibid.).

This is an important consideration, and one that this thesis takes as a guide in its reading of Banville’s fiction. These fictions are highly sophisticated, and frequently anticipate the issues Middleton raises in both their subject matter and their form. Banville’s plots often demonstrate how the male protagonist simultaneously lacks accurate self-reflection and suffers from an excess of self-reflection. They register a disillusionment with language that is explored through allegories or metaphors of masculine mastery or power, in which the process of self-narration is often circular and ironic, leaving the protagonists (and the reader) to wonder if their development is simply “[m]ore sentimentality, more self-delusion” (NL 94). In order to study the relationship between masculinity, language and power in Banville’s fiction, a perspective that fully accounts for the paradoxical evasiveness of masculinity will be required. This demand relates both to the structures of plot, character and theme within Banville’s texts themselves and to the critical perspectives through which they are read.

By making the sublime alluded to by Middleton one focus of this study of masculinity in Banville’s fiction, I address the power relations that underpin representations of gender in terms that attempt to account for the self-reflexivity that Banville’s fiction foregrounds. I do this primarily by examining the ways Banville presents aesthetic experience—that modern arena in which rationality is thought to be reconciled with the non-rational, namely the emotions and the senses—in order to structure a particular kind of masculine subjectivity. Banville’s body of work raids the storehouse of modernity for stories and concepts that dramatise aesthetic experience, highlighting it as a point of connection between multiple polarities or dialectics within both contemporary debates about representation and identity, and within long traditions of art, science and philosophy.

In doing so, this thesis will argue, Banville presents a consistent structure of subjectivity that resists simple distinctions between subject and object, or power and powerlessness. Drawing on the work of Nick Mansfield (1997), I suggest the arenas for this resistance are

the aesthetic of the sublime and the discourse of masochism, and I show how these inform Banville's strategic presentation of masculinity in relation to perceived changes in the landscapes of power. Mansfield sees masochism as the cultural logic of contemporary masculinity, and argues that "[u]nlike the patriarchy that is being replaced, contemporary masculinity wants to exercise its power, but it no longer wants to admit to being powerful" (2000:93). Mansfield's work is particularly useful for understanding the relation between Banville's representations of masculinity and the safety and isolation offered by the aesthetic. His protagonists always lack the power to determine their lives, and while this is often played out in literary or aesthetic games, it seems rooted in a problem Banville voices a safe historical distance from contemporary Ireland in his 1976 novel *Doctor Copernicus*:

He believed in action, in the absolute necessity for action. Yet action horrified him, tending as it did to become violence. Nothing was stable: politics became war, law became slavery, life itself became death, sooner or later. Always the ritual collapsed in the face of the hideousness. The real world would not be gainsaid, being the true realm of action, but he must gainsay it, or despair. (28)

While this thesis only obliquely links Banville's fiction directly to social or historical contexts, choosing instead to focus on the workings of subjectivity and the dynamics of Banville's fictional microcosms, it takes this focus in order to address highly political issues, such as those Banville describes through *Copernicus*. The desire for unity, origin and formal truth that is presented as a perpetual contradiction in Banville's fiction is itself a highly political ideal. My discussions of the scope and possibility of representation, of the relationship between artistic form and gender, and of the nostalgia for the kind of ideal subjectivity described above by McMinn as a "consolatory image of order," centre around the failure of this ideal, thus opening up a discussion of the gender-political implications of understanding masculine identities as fragmented, misplaced or redeemed.

Banville's career as a novelist began in the 1970s at the time of the Troubles and an economic crisis both in Ireland and globally, which was also a time in which the literary scene and cultural criticism was revolutionised by the rise of identity politics in the 1960s: new waves of civil rights movements, feminist movements, and poststructuralist and postcolonial theory created ways of understanding contemporary cultural formations and experiences around the world that championed difference and plurality. While it is difficult to make sustained, specific readings of a connection between the new theories of identity and nationhood and the drama of masculinity played out in Banville's fiction, his preoccupation with personal and narrative crises can be seen as a response to social upheavals and the 'paradigm shift' in cultural theory that surrounded his novelistic output in its first decade and beyond. Through Mansfield's theory of masochistic subjectivity as a reactionary or conservative strategy for managing power relations, it is possible to read Banville's focus on the realisation and representation of a unified (male) self as an elaborate defense of increasingly questionable aesthetic ideals. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Declan Kiberd links Banville with a group of writers who were sceptical of the new climate of support for artists brought on by the end of censorship and the establishment in 1980 of the *Aosdána* (of which Banville was a member from 1984 until 2001). Beckett's exile continued to inspire these artists, Kiberd suggests, and their work responded with "a remorseless privatization of experience, and an art which located its interest in the pathology of the alienated individual" (584).

At the very least, this privatisation of experience—which emphasises a crisis of literary form through the narrative focus on an isolated, male protagonist—provides justification for reading even Banville's most abstract and artificial creations as having significant gender-political consequences. In an article on his creative process, Banville quotes Theodor Adorno by way of indicating his own understanding of the relation between art and society:

The unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form. This, and not the deliberate injection of objective moments or social

content, defines art's relation to society. (qtd. in Banville 1996:119)

The transmutation of the social into artistic form, and particularly into “problems” or ‘crises’ of form, is, in a way, emblematic of the arguments set forth in this thesis, for the perpetually “unresolved antagonisms” of masculine subjectivity found in Banville’s fiction are closely identified with such problems of form. Their preservation as problems without a resolution mirrors the perpetually conflicted male narrators Banville creates – who by their inevitable ‘failures’ and misrecognitions define a politics of masculinity that holds onto an ideal artistic form and an ideal subjective state through the unending narrative of art’s, and its own, inauthenticity or fragmentation.

\*

Although gender has been a topic of some interest to Banville’s critics, there has been little in-depth discussion of masculinity as a key factor in the philosophical and aesthetic debates surrounding Banville’s writing. Joseph McMinn suggests that a discussion of masculinity is relevant but limits the attention he gives to it, as I will show below. Besides McMinn there have been a number of interesting discussions of gender, focusing particularly on the representation of female characters, and to some degree also examining questions of power relating to gender and the ekphrastic text (Coughlan 2006; Frehner 2000; Müller 2004). But first I will orient these studies within a brief overview of the book-length studies that comprise Banville criticism, noting where relevant the ideas on which this thesis builds.

Rüdiger Imhof’s *John Banville: a Critical Introduction* (1989), provided the earliest book-length treatment of Banville’s fiction, collecting together many of the readings he had made in earlier articles (1981a; 1987a; 1987b). Imhof is vehement in his denial of Irish writing that is “in the mould of cosy realism” or concerned with national identity (7), and argues in favour of the extension of modernist and postmodernist experimentation in “literary” writ-

ing and of a formalist criticism premised upon distinctions between literature and culture and between art and life (7-13). This is consistent with some of Banville's published statements on fiction writing and art. However, as Derek Hand points out (5-9), Imhof's view restricts interpretation to the terms of this dichotomy and suggests that social and political issues are part of a domestic Ireland entirely separate from the realm of art and "international" metafictional experimentation. This is clearly unsatisfactory for the reasons Hand gives, but it is instructive insofar as Imhof's critical approach emphasises one of the defining characteristics of Banville's male protagonists: they exhibit a desire to escape from what seems at times almost an embarrassment of home, a need to expand on a "little" Irish existence, and to seek out a supplementary otherness in the world of art. Thus, one of Banville's narrators overlays in his memory his first girlfriend's "grubby nails and sausage curls" with the image of "sunblurred skin . . . which Alessandro di Mariano knew so well, the texture of seraphs' wings" (B 68). Imhof's formalist approach means he largely ignores social context, so while his book offers a wealth of useful insights, it has little to say about the topic of masculinity.

Joseph McMinn's two book length studies, *John Banville: A Critical Study* (1991), and *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (1999), differ in that the latter "retains and extends the original structure . . . but . . . tries to place Banville within the contexts of the theory and practice of postmodernist writing . . . [and considers] an underlying dramatic pattern which questions the relation between masculinity and intellectualism" (1999:ix). Despite the promise of this statement, in both books McMinn's core argument is that Banville's fictions are "variations upon a premeditated theme . . . the life of the imagination" (1999:1). McMinn builds a case in which the notion of imagination, as defined by Wallace Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, "provides a historical link between romanticism, modernism and the post-modern mythologies of Banville's novels" (1999:3). The blurriness of the way various terms are deployed in McMinn's introduction becomes evident when we recall that Stevens is mentioned by Frederic Jameson in "Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism" (which

McMinn cites (2)) as clearly demarcating the *end* of modernism. The temptation to try to reconcile the many elements or traditions Banville draws on seems to lead McMinn to combine ideas in an imprecise manner.

Nonetheless, McMinn has identified important contexts for Banville's work that need further attention; it is simply that *Supreme Fictions* is limited in its approach to them. His comments on gender in Banville's fiction, with which I am primarily concerned here, tend to foreclose rather than encourage new kinds of discussion. An example of this is the way McMinn deals with a quote from Patricia Waugh, who notes that the "cultural tradition" of "splitting off what is considered to be the irrational, emotion, and projecting it as the 'feminine' onto actual women" (Waugh qtd. in McMinn 1999:2) is at work both in the Enlightenment's autonomous humanist subject and in the postmodern schizophrenic subject. Such an insight suggests that there is a continuity in the operations of power that sustains both models of subjectivity despite their historical differences, and thus that there are compelling reasons to consider such operations in relation to Banville's fiction. Yet McMinn recoils from a political reading that would explore Banville's presentation of masculinity in relation to this 'split' between the rational and the emotional, and instead re-iterates the value of the (presumably universal) artistic imagination. Again, this is due to his reliance on the Stevensian 'supreme fiction,' which affirms Banville's "humanistic aesthetic" (3) and provides "relief and understanding, some way back to a sense of original harmony" (3). By valorising this aesthetic—even in its failure-bound, modernist terms—where the male poet speaks to the earth as his "Fat girl . . . the irrational/Distortion, however fragrant, however dear" (Stevens 406), McMinn draws us back into a patriarchal mythology prevalent in postmodernity as well as modernity, which—according to Waugh—we ought to contend with critically.

McMinn's study does acknowledge what he calls an "anatomy, and a pathology, of a distinctively male psyche"; "a lost unity, notably in the masculine personality" (2); and a "patriarchal personality" (10) in Banville's fiction, but does not analyse their function or significance



any further. Appropriately, however, the “life of the imagination” that he takes as the central action of the novels is also a phrase used by Freud to describe the avoidance of the reality principle through the consolatory illusions of art. McMinn argues that Banville’s fiction offers a Romantic imagination dressed in postmodern metafictional artifice, and I would suggest that much of the temptation to hark back to a model of unproblematic creative agency stems from the fact that Banville writes about the fundamental disjunctions at the heart of contemporary subjectivity and the sublimations of desire we employ to manage them.

Ingo Berensmeyer’s study of Banville’s fiction places it in the context of the contemporary ‘crisis’ of authorship associated most famously with Roland Barthes’ “death of the author.” Banville’s fiction is, Berensmeyer tells us, a “literary acid test” (14) for seeking a better understanding of the history of authorship as well as its contemporary implications. He links Banville’s sampling of crucial historical periods, ideas and art forms to the development of the notion of authorship and concludes that “[t]he development traced is the reversal of a hierarchy, a revaluation of values from ‘worldpictures’ to ‘pictureworlds’” (254). Thus, Banville’s thematic development parallels a historical development in the idea of authorship moving from the systematic totalities critiqued in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* to ‘world-making’ as a postmodern preoccupation. Although Berensmeyer has little to say about gender issues, his understanding irony as “the only possible mode for such a literary ‘crisis management’” (169) has been useful in constructing my own argument that Banville presents masculinity as powerless or in ‘crisis’ precisely as a way of recuperating a perceived loss of power or controlling relations between the self and other.

Derek Hand’s 2002 study, *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*, returns in part to ground familiar from McMinn’s book when it argues that Banville’s writing is “an attempt to delineate [the] strain and tension” that occurs in “the human imagination’s engagement with the real world” (1). Yet it also makes connections between Banville’s work and the concept of ‘Irishness’, a task that has been considered difficult due to Banville’s avoidance—for the

most part—of constructing realistic cultural geographies or addressing socio-political issues. Hand refers to Richard Kearney’s exploration of the often conflicting transitional narratives twentieth century Irish writing has produced—most notably between revivalist and avant-garde modernisms—to contextualise Banville’s work. From here, Hand goes on to emphasise Banville’s “radical ‘in-betweenness,’” evidenced by “characters and situations that exploit this double legacy of been[sic] positioned in the hyphenated space between Anglo and Irish” (18). This comment is relevant to my account of masculine identity, particularly in Chapter Three, insofar as the binary logic structuring the conflicts Banville presents his narrators with relies upon this kind of ‘in-betweenness.’

In *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville* (2004a), Elke D’hoker makes significant advances in addressing the status of the Other in Banville’s fiction. D’hoker addresses ethical questions as well as a range of other important topics, including epiphany, the double, and autobiography. In Chapter Five I will address her reading of the murder scene in *The Book of Evidence* and the ensuing narratives about self and other in *Ghosts* and *Athena*. While her discussion of poststructuralist ethical criticism makes an important contribution to the debate, I disagree with her conclusion that the narrators of the art trilogy achieve an “acceptance of alterity” (D’hoker 2004a:200), however fleeting, that provides them with a momentary authentic selfhood. Rather, this thesis understands Banville’s fiction through what I describe as a “masculine sublime,” a subjectivity that fails to recognise otherness as *absolutely other*, and derives a form of control through positing its relation to the other as a heroic or despairing failure. Similarly, when D’hoker discusses epiphany as a possible avenue to the other, I would suggest that the conservative impulse of the sublime is at work. Like most other major critics, d’Hoker also discusses the process of atonement in the art trilogy, which Banville couches in terms of parturition, or a kind of imaginative masculine birth, without giving special attention to its gender specificity.

Ruth Frehner wrote the first article specifically addressing gender issues in Banville's fiction. Although she writes mostly about *The Newton Letter*, many of her observations apply elsewhere; importantly, she begins from the premise that women are "always mediated through the mind of a male protagonist, a narrator, and, more than anything else, they reflect his desires and fears" (51). Frehner identifies the two categories of women with whom readers of Banville will be familiar: "Either they are sensual, plump, unlovely, awkward, blonde and fairly simple-minded, offering themselves to the narrator; or they are slender pale, dark-haired, unfathomable, elusive and therefore desirable" (ibid.). While this description works best for the situation in *The Newton Letter*, these categories, with some variation, are applicable to most of the novels. In any case, Frehner gives direction to the study of masculine subjectivity undertaken in this thesis when she argues that the protagonists' relationships with women in Banville's fiction are "epistemophilic," that women function as metaphors for artistic form in which "the female body provides the space for man's movements, his discoveries" (56).

A contributor to the 2006 John Banville special issue of *Irish University Review*, Patricia Coughlan, investigates the "pervasive erotic and triadic scenes and patterns" (85) that structure male-female relationships in virtually every instance in Banville's fiction. In many cases, she shows how the triads (male narrator and two female characters) end up excluding the narrator and revealing his futile desire or mistaken assumptions. She also comments on the power structure at work in these triads; for instance: "One might remark that Banville engineers a plot which allows Freddie to feel himself victimized even while availing of the stereotypical pornographic thrill of having sex with two women" (99:n22). The triads show how Banville's texts are specifically constructed to highlight the conflicts within the male protagonist's desires and, in particular, his 'misrecognition' or foolish romanticisation of women. I discuss an instance of these triangular relationships in detail in Chapter Six, but many of the insights of Coughlan's argument have been applied elsewhere in discussions of the way various pairs and triads represent conflicting forces or values.

Anja Müller's reading of "materialization" in Banville's 'art trilogy' has also been particularly useful, for it connects the genre of ekphrasis with Banville's representation of women, arguing that "ekphrasis can be said to operate as a multi-layered discursive matrix for the materialisation of the female body . . . because [it] establish[es] a kind of grid, or frame, within which female bodies are discursively constructed in order to be endowed with some kind of presence" (187). Examination of this discursive and aesthetic grid shows how the artistic tropes Banville deploys in his fiction are premised upon certain assumptions about the gender of materiality itself. Importantly, Müller understands identities to be actively constructed through writing, and thus avoids the traditional humanist understanding of masculinity found in McMinn and others. Müller also expresses rather clearly a question this thesis takes up when she states: "the problem at stake in the trilogy is why such a materialization ultimately remains unsuccessful, and whether it is precisely the ekphrastic strategy, employed to create presence, that eventually accounts for this Pygmalion's failure" (188). Ekphrasis, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Five, is simply one device used by Banville to present the possibility of materialising a presence. Banville's fiction constructs the possibility of pure self-presence, or the pure presence of a female other, as a kind of sublimity. This relationship can be understood in a variety of ways – as spiritual or secular epiphany, as intellectual hubris, or as stubborn desire. With regard to Freddie and Banville's other protagonists alike, I will argue that this sublime is attractive precisely because it is unrealisable.

The chapters of this thesis follow a roughly chronological order so as to present my arguments in the context of Banville's evolving body of work. Novels to which common questions must be addressed have been grouped together to provide thematic focus from chapter to chapter, as I will outline. There are, however, some works I have not discussed at length for various reasons specific to each, which must be noted first.

In writing this thesis I have not aimed for a comprehensive chronology of Banville's writing, since this has already been provided by several critics. Instead, I have analysed a number of significant threads that repeat throughout many of his major works, and undertaken to focus on the issues of gender surrounding the construction (or performance) of a narrative subject. I have not examined Banville's plays, nor his crime novels (*Christine Falls* (2006) and *The Silver Swan* (2007)), published under the name Benjamin Black, because they contribute less to this goal than his other works. The early works *Long Lankin* (1970, 2nd ed. 1984) and *Nightspawn* (1971) were excluded in part because they represent an early phase in Banville's career in which the characteristic themes and stylistic control of his writing is not yet fully developed. Banville's decision to alter *Long Lankin* for the second edition signaled his dissatisfaction with some of the work from that period; in particular, the story "De Rerum Natura", which replaces the much longer novella "The Dispossessed," makes Banville's affinity with philosophical themes much clearer.

Despite the success of the Man-Booker prize winning novel *The Sea* (2005), I do not discuss it at length because it was published well after substantial parts of this thesis were written. Another absence that must be acknowledged is *The Untouchable* (1998), a work that deserves a much fuller treatment than this thesis is able to give. Due to the limits of space, time and the need to manage the scope of the argument, I have not devoted a chapter to *The Untouchable*, though I readily concede that the character of Victor Maskell offers much that speaks to the arguments of the thesis - particularly his claim that "all that I am is of a piece: all of a piece and yet broken up into a myriad selves" (Banville 1998c:34). Such a claim to simultaneous fragmentation and unity demands further exploration, as do the significant connections between male homosexuality and betrayal that Banville develops in *The Untouchable*, and which appear elsewhere in his fiction as well. While I have sketched some of these connections in a conference paper, 'Father, the gate is open': intertextuality and the drama of masculinity in the fiction of John Banville" (IASIL, 2006), much further work remains for the

future.

Chapter One establishes a set of contexts for the reading of masculinity in this thesis. Broadly, it specifies connections between the aesthetics of the sublime and representations of masculinity and femininity, and links this to Nick Mansfield's groundbreaking account of the discourse of masochism as a means for understanding twentieth century works of literature and cultural theory in terms of their representation of masculinity's relationship to power. I link this account with theories that define subject-formation in terms of an ambivalent relationship to power, notably those of Louis Althusser and Judith Butler, and provide further support for my approach to the micro-politics of subjectivity associated with the sublime and masochism. Banville's use of historical perspectives is also linked to a structure of 'sublime masculinity' through a discussion of counter-memory and resistance to historical realism, showing how disavowals of access to the past are inevitably yoked to an 'intuition' or projection of a sublime space for the narrative subject to inhabit.

Chapter Two examines the translation of contemporary issues of representation into the context of the rise of scientific thinking in the early modern period as it is developed in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*. These historical figures are portrayed as men in whom the relationship between intellectualism and social or interpersonal relationships takes on a certain structure: the pressure from without seems to inspire their revolutionary ideas in the emerging field of scientific astronomy.

Chapter Three investigates the role of historical representation in *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter*. Beginning by examining some of the ways in which Banville's narratives engage with issues of gender embedded in the genres on which it draws, this chapter also links the problematisation of history to Banville's strongly gendered patterns of imagery. These patterns link the novels' questioning of historical and narrative representation with the performance of a sublime aesthetic based on traditions that associate masculinity and femininity with certain philosophical positions. While Banville develops a highly complex usage of his-

torical writing and “historical” literary genres in these novels, any critique of historiographic discourse is subordinated to the articulation of a ‘sublime’ masculine subjectivity. Despite their concocted histories being exposed as fictions, the protagonists of these novels assert their self-deluded imagination over the realities they face in order to continue to dream—to paraphrase part of the quote from Sir Isaac Newton that forms the epigraph to *The Newton Letter*—of a great ocean of truth lying all undiscovered before them.

Chapter Four presents two readings of *Mefisto*. This last work in Banville’s ‘science tetralogy’ is a highly self-conscious and artificial text in which mirroring and doubling are constant reminders of the lack of self-sufficient individuation. The first section of the chapter shows how masculine subjectivity is defined through the ‘othering’ of femininity. The second section takes its theoretical basis from Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of what they call “faciality,” in order to understand *Mefisto* as intensifying binary structures of difference. Understood this way, the text exemplifies a violent ordering that is particularly relevant to the sorting of desires and categorising of bodies. I argue that through his disfigurement, narrator Gabriel Swan is dramatically excluded from the symbolic mastery he sought, but that through the sublime structure of subjectivity this exclusion becomes a pathway to being “re-born” as a “new man,” and allows him to maintain the (impossible) ideal of making the world rational.

Chapter Five deals with the ‘art trilogy’ comprised of *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena*. It identifies different themes or issues in each novel and links these to a broader discussion of masculinity and the ubiquitous theme of visual art. In these novels, the stakes in the game of mis-recognition become increasingly higher. From the perspective of this thesis, the paintings are a means by which Banville’s characters can more thoroughly immerse themselves in what Nick Mansfield calls structures of “indifference.” Far from deconstructing the difference between reality and representation, the ‘art trilogy’ supports a structure of subjectivity whereby the superior immediacy of visual realism seems to offer a ‘truth,’ but in fact it only deepens the narrators’ commitment to their own aesthetic perspective. This perspective

defines not just the relation between the subject as a privileged viewer and interpreter of art, but to the female figures and relationships of desire depicted in the artworks.

Chapter Six follows on from the obviously performative nature of the first-person narratives that make up the art trilogy by examining notions of return and redemption in *Eclipse* and *Shroud*, novels that share characters as well as thematic concerns such as impersonation and identity as performance. In this final chapter I trace Paul de Man's notion of aesthetic ideology, and the centrality to this notion of his particular reading of Kant, as an illuminating theoretical context for understanding Banville's exploration of anti-humanist perspectives presented, as always, in the context of gender and power. I also show how the character relationships in these novels form a "revenant" structure which indicates the 'deadness' of aesthetic perception, a negation that is nonetheless controlled through the writing of the text itself.



# Chapter I

## Power, Gender, and the Sublime

This chapter describes what I call the ‘masculine sublime’ that characterises Banville’s fiction. “The sublime,” which became prominent as a kind of overwhelming object or powerful subjective experience in 18th century aesthetic theory, describes a process of subjectivisation in which a limit is articulated. This limit is traditionally the limit of one’s capacity to conceive or imagine an object. Moreover, this chapter holds that the ‘failure,’ or limitation, that occurs in Banville’s sublime is neither a product of spontaneous contact with the reality of the Other as some critics have argued, nor of that Kantian a priori synthetic judgement that shows how the world and the mind convene in a lawful, ordered universe, as Banville’s use of certain philosophical terms seems to suggest. Instead, the aesthetic of the sublime stretches its limits through negation and suspension. It is characterised by relationships of power that involve the disavowal and subsequent recuperation of certain objects or experiences for knowledge or representation, and, most importantly, the recuperation of an idealised subjectivity. By connecting the sublime with the drive towards “knowledge, mastery or synthesis” (D’hoker 2004a:11) that, explicitly or implicitly, characterises Banville’s fiction, I argue that it forms the

primary link between the aesthetic and formal dimensions of Banville's texts and the gender politics inherent in their construction of the masculine subject.

Beginning with 18th century formulations of the sublime, this chapter looks into the ways in which modern notions of power and gender relations were shaped by this most influential of aesthetic experiences. I connect Nick Mansfield's work on masochism and the sublime with this discussion in order to characterise the ubiquitous politics of masculinity which arises from power relations mediated or structured by the logic of the sublime. To explore the reach of the 'masculine sublime,' I examine three topics that provide a broad theoretical basis to this reading of masculinity. Firstly, the chapter draws out the ideological character of the sublime as a structural feature of the subject's formative relation to power. In Banville's fiction the aesthetic ideology that "tricks" the subject in the first instance is revealed as false only to be re-energised or re-organised in some new way (this is particularly evident in *Athena*, where the final, unexamined painting is the only authentic one, thus recouping the narrator's hopes that the fake paintings had put in question). Secondly, the chapter elaborates on the "counter-memorial" subjectivity that sustains a form of subjective desire in the individual's relation to the past. Specifically, this is a relation of the self to the unrecoverable, that which is lost in the past. While this dissociation of narrative from a sense of stable historicism adopts many of the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988), I argue that it ultimately reinscribes the subject's relation to the past as a contradictory source of identity structured by the sublime. Thirdly, the discussion turns to the representation of materiality and its relation to philosophical traditions that distinguish between the intelligible and the sensible using gender terms. In doing so, it outlines how images of physical bodies and sexuality are used in order to advance the masculine sublime. Banville's fictions dramatise the power inherent in certain kinds of knowledge—primarily the visions associated with scientific insight and perspective painting—and revisit major modern cultural practices in which masculinist ideologies have shaped gender relations. Originally supported by traditional sources

of authority but now long subject to the scrutiny of (meta-) philosophical critique, these ideologies are part of Banville's protagonists' distinctive character and shape the authoritative, ironic, thoroughly literary voice of his novels that is continuously undercut by social and ethical failings.

## 1.1 The Sublime in Burke and Kant

*I know nothing sublime which is not some modification of power*<sup>1</sup>

The eighteenth century discourse on the sublime and the beautiful drew heavily on ideas about gender for its arguments. The sublime enacts a form of “masculine empowerment” (Mellor 85) in which some of the core philosophies of modernity are dramatised. This section will outline some of the ways in which Burke and Kant are key proponents of this sublime experience in which the struggle between competing forces or faculties results in the affirmation of a masculinist rationality underlying aesthetic response. Edmund Burke wrote one of the most important modern accounts of the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1987). His theory was “sensationist” (Boulton x-xiii), in that it derived an aesthetic theory from the basic sensations of pain and pleasure – the first of several binary structures which are said to underpin sublime experiences. Burke defines the sublime as “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is analogous to terror” (39). Beauty, by contrast, signifies “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (91). Thus, the sublime is ultimately produced by self-preservation: “The passions,” Burke tells us, “which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on pain and danger, and they are the most powerful of the passions” (38). Beauty is demoted to a passion of “society,” within which Burke distinguishes the “society of the sexes, which answers the purposes of propagation; and next, that more general society, which we have with men and with other animals, and which we may in some sort be said to have even with the inanimate world” (40).

Burke is fairly explicit in defining the sublime as a privileged masculine experience and the beautiful as a subsidiary feminine one. Burke’s analysis clearly defines a hierarchy of further terms for understanding these experiences. For Burke, sublimity is vast, threatening,

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<sup>1</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 64.

strong, rough, yet obscure, and ill-defined or unbounded. Beauty is generally small, weak, smooth, delicate, and always clearly visible. Burke groups these differences under a rubric of power: “we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us” (113). Furthermore, he explains these qualities and differences of the sublime and the beautiful through examples which emphasise domination and physical or political power:

pleasure follows the will . . . but pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly. So that strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush in upon the mind together. Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense? No; the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction. (65)

The power of strength, with its ability to inspire fear, is sublime according to the justifications of both “natural” and political might. For instance, Burke reasons that dogs are subservient and therefore contemptible, yet wolves possess “unmanageable fierceness” and therefore are sublime: “Thus we are affected by strength, which is *natural* power” (67; original emphasis). Naturalness is also implied in the authority of political and religious fathers: “The power which arises from institution in kings and commanders, has the same connection with terror. Sovereigns are frequently addressed with the title of *dread majesty*” (67; original emphasis). Unsurprisingly, God is the ultimate source of sublime terror, in whose omnipresence “we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are in a manner, annihilated before him” (68).<sup>2</sup> Thus aesthetic qualities are predicated upon relations of power, and these relations are, in accordance with Burke’s values, considered to be naturally divided by gender.

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<sup>2</sup> Burke also notes that “[i]n the scripture, whenever God is represented as appearing or speaking, everything terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the divine presence” (69). It is interesting to compare this with Banville’s veneration of modernist art: “works such as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* have taken on, or have been conferred with, a biblical quality: they have become the Psalms, they have become the

This gender division becomes even more apparent when Burke describes beauty. His rejection of the notion that beauty is caused by proportion or perfection is particularly striking in this regard; Burke argues that beauty, “where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature” (110). Rather than isolated “sensible qualities” it is in fact conformity to a hierarchy of power that legitimises aesthetic judgments. Perhaps the fact that Burke’s aesthetic terms divided the sexes according to a model of power is most telling when the hierarchy threatens to contradict itself and collapse. For instance, despite being small, submissive and visually apprehensible, the beautiful is not trustworthy, and remains a dangerous subordinate, as this often quoted passage shows:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface continual and yet hardly perceptible at any point which forms one of the great constituents of beauty? (115)

Burke’s description borders on the unbounded and disorienting of the sublime, a “giddy” experience which contradicts the fundamental perceptibility and fixability of the beautiful in his aesthetic scheme. Peter Cosgrove notes that “[t]he variation of the breast is charged with the long history of Circe in western culture, the fear of the powerful woman. It is not merely

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Book. Why? What constitutes the quality of the numinous in them? What is it that speaks to our need for texts, for Holy Writ? I believe it is the quality of *closure*” (Banville 1990:77). Banville describes a need for the qualities of a text created by an independent power, such as a god or an artistic genius, who is essentially ‘unreachable’ for the reader. Just as a god is a projection of power beyond the human scale, the modernist text for Banville seems to indicate a power which is turned away from its reader but which might make some transcendence of the world possible.

variation that arouses Burke's anxieties but the simulation of power in an object too small to evoke the terror of the sublime" (Cosgrove 414).

Unlike the experience of the beautiful object Burke holds to be generally true—that it is fundamentally small, clearly defined, and altogether unchallenging—his experience of a “deceitful maze” shows that the politics of looking are not so easily contained by his two categories. This passage also points, as Tom Furniss suggests in *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution*, to the importance Burke places upon agency in facing the aesthetic object. Furniss notes that although the sublime may seem to overwhelm the subject with fearful danger or pain, Burke's account in fact retains agency as an integral part of the experience. “Delight” is the name Burke gives to the pleasure of the sublime, “the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger” (Burke 37) – a feeling which is different, he insists, from “positive pleasure”, which is part of everyday enjoyment and is unrelated to the removal of pain. However, “when pain or danger press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (Burke 40). From this, Furniss argues that ‘removal’ is best understood as the subject's act of removal, “the sublime therefore being the experience of the threatened self seeming to overcome or master danger through *effort*” (Furniss 25; original emphasis).

For Furniss this agency has wider implications. Set in its historical and political context, he reads Burke's model of the sublime as a construction which supports the causes of the emerging bourgeois subject. If we accept the importance of effort or of overcoming in Burke's descriptions of the sublime, then we see that the sublime inspires because it urges the (masculine) subject to a difficult labour; by contrast, the beautiful becomes contemptible for its lack of resistance or ‘difficulty.’ From this line of reasoning, Furniss concludes that

Beauty's most pernicious quality of all, therefore, is that it gives the sublime nothing upon which to exercise itself or labour . . . In its revolt against the beautiful, then,

the sublime must invent its own tasks. In retreat from the ‘feminine’ – or from its own potential for ‘effeminacy’ – the masculine bourgeois subject is repeatedly driven to labour in order repeatedly to redefine itself in its own terms. (39)

Burke’s concept of the sublime not only defined a privileged masculine aesthetic experience, but also formed the basis for a bourgeois politics legitimised by labour. This aspect of the sublime is still a key ingredient in narratives of masculine subjectivity, which frequently require their protagonists to struggle against impossible odds or super-human forces. It is part of the legacy of the sublime that the (masculine writing) subject faces impossible or infinitely complex labours as part of his self-formation. This legacy is present in Banville’s fiction in the firmly anti-heroic stance of his work that at the same time asserts its desire for mastery. Part of an elaborate mode of self-determination, the sublime aspect of work operates from within apparent constraints (lack of imagination, lack of agency, lack of power or knowledge) as a drama of abandonment and recuperation; and this drama is, as I will discuss later in this chapter, integral to the structure of subjectivity that masochism and the sublime have in common.

As a trope for postmodern perspectives on language the Kantian sublime has, at least since Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), enjoyed a revival (Nancy 25-54; Crowther 2-3). It is central to most of the contemporary uses of the sublime which I discuss here as forms of masculinity’s self-presentation. Kant’s anecdotal, pre-Critical work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), is also of some interest here since it employs gender as a reference point for aesthetic terms in ways that echo Burke, and prepares for the major role of the sublime in *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

The *Observations* adopts a gender division between the two aesthetic qualities similar to that of Burke but directly opposed to Burke’s “sensationist” perspective, in that Kant finds “[t]he various feelings of enjoyment or of displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person’s own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain” (45). The beautiful and sublime arise from the internal disposition



or subjective state rather than external objects or physical senses, and are therefore not material properties. Following this, Kant marshals a number of oppositions, such as “[t]he sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*” (47; original emphasis), or “[u]nderstanding is sublime, wit is beautiful” (51), in order to categorise the two aesthetic experiences. Although he would not develop the “mathematical sublime” and the “dynamic sublime” until much later, he nevertheless suggests here that “[m]athematical representation of the infinite magnitude of the universe, the meditations of metaphysics upon eternity, Providence, and the immortality of our souls contain a certain sublimity and dignity” (57) – a link which will lead directly into the themes of Banville’s ‘scientific tetralogy.’<sup>3</sup>

The third chapter of Kant’s *Observations* is devoted to establishing the oppositions between the feminine as beautiful and the masculine as sublime. However, the priority of the aesthetic terms is uncertain at best, since to contemporary readers it appears that gender difference is not invoked in order to define the aesthetic categories so much as the reverse: that the sublime and beautiful are designed to consolidate the hierarchy of gender. “All judgements of the two sexes must refer to these criteria” (77), Kant declares, dividing as he does so various branches of knowledge and qualities of personality and behaviour into two exclusive and opposed groups. “The fair sex,” Kant writes, “has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime” (78; original emphasis). Thus feminine understanding is valuable only insofar as this understanding leads to more apprehension of beauty. Limited just to beautiful perspectives of the world, understanding of what Kant considers the universal principles of morality is beyond “the fair sex”, as are utilitarian knowledge, or awareness of “the particular subdivisions of these lands, their industry, power, and sovereigns” (80).

As with Burke, the notion of labour is important to Kant’s pre-Critical notion of the

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<sup>3</sup> There is a strong parallel between the story of “sublime coldness” Kant tells about “Carazan’s Dream,” (1965:48-9, note) and Banville’s characterisation of Nicholas Copernicus.

sublime. Femininity is negatively defined as unfit for the hard work of (masculine) thinking: “Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroys the merits that are proper to her sex” (78). The masculine self is characterised by its struggle, which is usually an active and virtuous occupation, particularly where moral principles or reasoning must overcome sensory or emotional temptations. Kant’s differentiation between the sublime and beautiful in terms of male and female is evidence of a tendency to view femininity as what Mary Wiseman calls the “‘power of nature’, of all that man would subdue in order to assert himself” (Wiseman 174). The sublime, reinforced by “natural” gender roles, is an agent of masculine, Faustian progress that lays claim to nature for its authority, yet must overcome nature in the drive to become modern (Berman 60-71).

In the *Critique of Judgment*, the faculty of judgment is developed as a mediator between pure reason and the faculty of understanding in Kant’s systematic philosophy of the mind. Here too, the sublime entails a rigid detachment from materiality, especially from the body and emotion (Mellor 88-9). For Kant, the importance of the aesthetic arises because matters of taste and aesthetic pleasure seem to be based on utterly subjective judgments, and his project of defending universal forms of thought, which he claims pre-exist the phenomenal world (the a priori categories), is challenged by this apparent variation. The sublime, in particular, appears to be irrational and purposeless as a human response to experience. However, Kant manages to assign sublime nature a purpose by which it serves to corroborate his idealist philosophical system.

The problem Kant deals with is how to reconcile the subjective nature of judgments of taste with the claim they seem to make to universal validity. Arguing against empirical or sensationist accounts like Burke’s, Kant insists that aesthetic judgments do not involve the senses, and so do not pertain to the properties of objects. Rather, they are “reflective” judgments which are disinterested and universal, albeit in a specific and complex fashion. Kant created “reflective” judgments in order to supplement what he had already established as “de-

terminant” judgments, which is, in Andrew Bowie’s explanation, “when the Understanding subsumes the particular intuition under a general category . . . The problem with this kind of judgment is that no amount of applying it will demonstrate that the multiplicity to which it applies has any kind of unity” (23). In other words, this kind of judgment applies the Kantian categories to the “multiplicity” or manifold of sensory information, but it cannot justify why the particular should be harnessed in this way without making a dogmatic assertion of the validity of the a priori conceptual apparatus. So, Kant introduces self-ordering, reflective judgments in the third critique in order to suggest an inherent order and purpose in nature which can move in the opposite direction to “determinant” judgments and indicate general principles from the multiplicity of experiences.

Kant’s discussion of the sublime begins by noting the significance of bounded or “framed” form:

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object’s] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality. (Kant 1987:98; original emphasis)

For Kant, the totality of something infinite can be thought as an idea of reason (for example, the idea of infinite space), but cannot be presented by the imagination because that faculty cannot cope with an unbounded thought. Although for Kant aesthetic qualities do not inhere in objects, but rather are the product of the mind, his description of the feeling of the beautiful is similar to Burke’s “sensationist” account in some respects. As for Burke, the beautiful arises when a totality is bounded and presentable, and so signifies accepted forms of knowledge and a “controlled” objectivity. By contrast, the feeling of the sublime creates an impasse, a feeling that the apprehension we experience is “contrapurposive for our power of judgment,

incommensurate with our power of exhibition, and as it were violent to our imagination, and yet we judge it all the more sublime for that” (Kant 1987:99). The sublime cannot be contained, in the sense that it is unrepresentable in an image, and so to Kant, initially seems to oppose the purpose of judgment itself.

The Kantian sublime describes a double process: the imagination’s failure (being “incommensurate with our power of exhibition”) prompts a simultaneous awareness of what Kant calls our “supersensible vocation” in the faculty of reason – the fact that our conceptual faculties apparently prove more powerful than our ability to “present” or “exhibit” empirically based images. This supports both Kant’s metaphysics and his ethics by showing that the sublime in nature actually has the purpose of revealing to humans that the foundations of their mental capacities lie in the “categories”, or basic forms of thought, which Kant believed underpin and structure our experience of reality. There is no determinate concept or category which the sublime indicates; rather, the sublime represents the “drive towards the as yet unapprehended” (Ferguson 1992:327). Here is Kant describing this “double process”:

[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling), and in contrast with that use any other use is small. Hence, what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgement. (Kant 1987:105-106; original editorial additions)

The sublime shows us the power of reason through the failure of our imagination to present an idea or image. Importantly, it is not the object but the “attunement” of the mind the object

inspires that is sublime. A further dimension to the contradiction that produces the sublime is that “the object is apprehended as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure” (Kant 1987:117). Kant describes a subject that is inspired to know and master its objects of knowledge through the enabling power of its initial failure to “present” (or imagine) them. The sublime therefore situates modern subjectivity within a power struggle that takes place between competing ways of knowing, yet always with the rational unfolding of the mind’s categories as his goal.

Both Burke and Kant contributed to a discourse in which ideas about masculinity and femininity were building blocks in the construction of a “natural” aesthetic function. In Kant’s case, this function was the keystone of his critical philosophy. The influence of this tradition, I suggest, is still found in work such as Banville’s, where the aesthetics of the sublime contributes to the formulation and regulation of gender, in particular as a feature of intellectual masculinity. Nick Mansfield, in particular, has identified one arena where the sublime persists as a key structure: in those texts he describes as “masochistic”. This includes both masochism as subject matter, but also as what he argues is a prevalent cultural form of masculinity articulated in postmodern power relations (Mansfield 1997). Therefore, the next section will examine the sublime further, in its context as the aesthetic dimension of masochistic power relations.

## 1.2 Masochism and the Sublime

*“Do get up,” said the good fellow, “this is disgraceful.”*

*“What is disgraceful?”*

*“To fall asleep with your clothes on and a book in your hand.”*

*He snuffed the candles which had burned right down and picked up the volume that had fallen from my hand. He looked at the title page:*

*“Aha, Hegel. Besides, it is time we left for Mr. Severin’s, he is expecting us for tea.”<sup>4</sup>*

The term ‘masochism’ was coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a pioneer of psychopathology of the nineteenth century, in his work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). As Foucault observed, the past three centuries have seen the development and diversification of discourses that posit the truth about sexuality, and find various solutions which describe and categorise—while intensifying our awareness of—that sexuality (1978:17-35). Masochism became a widely known phenomenon through the development of legal and psychopathological apparatuses following on from Krafft-Ebing’s work. Freud’s “Three Essays on Sexuality” (1905), and “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924)—the latter of which distinguished between ‘erotogenic,’ ‘feminine,’ and ‘moral’ forms—further ‘naturalised’ masochism as a psychological condition, and established what is now generally accepted as the continuity and reversibility between masochism and sadism.

What continues to interest literary critics is the fact that Krafft-Ebing drew on narrative fiction for his new term, making the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895) his point of reference, just as he did with Sade and sadism – the ‘partner’ with which masochism is inevitably linked. Gilles Deleuze’s study of these unique writers, “Coldness and Cruelty” (1991; 1st English ed. 1967), revived literary and cultural studies interest in masochism. Further recent contributions have been made by Studlar (1988) (film studies), Silverman (1992)

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<sup>4</sup> Leopold von Sacher Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 147.

(psychology/gender/cultural studies), Mansfield (1997) (literary/cultural studies/theory), Stewart (1998) (cultural studies), and Cosgrove (1999) (cultural history/visuality). The links that Sacher-Masoch's texts originally forged between sexuality, textuality, aesthetic pleasure and power continue to make it a topic of interest to contemporary theories of gender and subjectivity, as well as to readers of a range of 20th century literary texts.

Deleuze returned to the formal and aesthetic aspects of the literary texts from which masochism and sadism derive their names. On the basis of the very different aims, styles, and formal properties of Sacher-Masoch's and Sade's respective bodies of literary work—something psychologists and psychoanalysts have found it convenient to ignore—Deleuze argues that the worlds of masochism and sadism are totally separate. As his later collaborations with Felix Guattari show, Deleuze opposes Freud's reductionist, patriarchal model of desire. Far from there being a single, reversible sado-masochism, Deleuze claims that "their worlds do not communicate, and as novelists their techniques are totally different. Sade expresses himself in a form which combines obscenity in description with rigor and apathy in demonstration, while the art of Masoch consists in multiplying the disavowals in order to create the coldness of aesthetic suspense" (133). Deleuze does not view masochism as simply finding pleasure in receiving pain or humiliation; instead, he argues that the masochist uses pain or punishment as a way of deferring pleasure and creating the conditions for an immanently pleasurable desire or what he calls "a state of waiting" (71).<sup>5</sup>

Deleuze focused on the external, formal aspects of masochism – particularly the device of the contract and the aesthetic elements of coldness and suspension or "stillness" in narrative. These are important elements of Banville's fiction, too. Stillness or stasis, in particular, is an aesthetic trademark of Banville's that finds its apotheosis in the ekphrastic descriptions

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<sup>5</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the masochist seeks release from the teleology of desire: "the masochist's suffering is the price he must pay, not to achieve pleasure, but to untie the pseudobond between desire and pleasure as an extrinsic measure. Pleasure is in no way something that can be attained only by a detour through suffering; it is something that must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of desire" (155).

of paintings or statues in the *Frames* trilogy. While these “still moments” might be read as instances of Keats’s timeless “silent form,” or in other cases as modernist epiphany, my reading combines the logic of the sublime with aesthetic qualities Deleuze identifies in the discourse of masochism in order to characterise Banville’s staging of masculine subjectivity.

In a literary context, readings involving masochism have come in a variety of forms. Eve Sorum, for instance, finds that masochism is “more useful as a metaphor that illuminates certain literary acts” (27) than as a psychological tool. In her reading of Eliot and Woolf she makes links between modernist aesthetics and masochism, arguing that there is a clearly discernable “modernist aesthetic—a sense of both resiliency and despair in the face of terrifying mental, social, and political events . . . [that] depends on a dynamics of suffering and compensation that can be described as masochism” (25). Sorum finds that “the suffering, pain, self-sacrifice, and disorientation [common to modernist writing] are precisely what enable acts of literary creation, and the artist comes into being through exposure to such shattering experiences” (26). The importance of her perspective is that she views the modernist trauma as the condition that allows a ‘reconstruction’ of the self to take place. While Sorum does not explicitly see masochism as a manifestation of power, she does argue that it is a significant enabling condition for modernist creativity.

In a more complex analysis, Lisa Rado’s study of what she terms the “androgyne imagination” in modernist writing argues that imagining an idealised Other—particularly in terms of the gendered tradition of the male poet and his female muse—derives “not so much from the artist’s need to be inspired as to be empowered and authorized by the culture within which he or she creates” (2). She shows how modernist writers responded to the challenges posed to the two-sex model by new psychological and evolutionary theories. For example, Rado finds that *Ulysses* “critiques this modern “masochistic solution” [masochism as a performance of inverted traditional gender roles and practices] by comparing it to the transcendental experience of the sublime and exposing both modes as problematic” (51). In light of Joyce’s likely reading



of *The Dominant Sex* by Mathilde and Mathias Vaerting, Rado argues his position was that “[h]ierarchy and domination lead to rebellion and reversal; the cycle never ends. Joyce suggests that masochism and the sublime cannot help but participate in these patriarchal structures, and, instead, he attempts to subvert and therefore escape altogether the prison of hierarchies” (52-53). In other words, Joyce saw that masochism as a simple inversion of gender roles remained firmly within established patriarchal power structures and sought to find a better solution. Rado argues that the performance of Bloom and Bella/o in “Circe” indicates Joyce holds out the “positive *potential* of an androgynous vision—the Deleuzian New Man—while simultaneously presenting the social and political obstacles that ultimately prevent its realization” (55; original emphasis). However, it is difficult to identify a moment of true subversion of hierarchical gender positions in masochism, since it relies upon and reinforces these positions in its operation.

My understanding of masochism in this thesis draws mainly on Nick Mansfield’s *Masochism: The Art of Power* (1997). Like Deleuze, Mansfield stresses masochism’s literary origins as a discourse that mixes certain aesthetic forms and subject matter with broader issues of power and representation. As such, it comprises one of the main perspectives on what I have called the “masculine sublime” that characterises Banville’s fiction. Mansfield’s notion of masochistic subjectivity connects the aesthetic and the political and allows for a reading of masculinity in Banville that retains a balance between these often conflicting perspectives. Mansfield establishes connections between various threads of philosophical, psychoanalytical, and literary writing on or about masochism and their role in modern and postmodern cultures. His focus is primarily on masochism as a set of power relations, underpinned by the logic of the sublime, that structure masculinity.

Power can be understood as having an equivocal, yet inseparable relationship with subjectivity. Judith Butler, for instance, notes how we “are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates” us, while at the same time it is

also “what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are” (1997:2). That is to say, our relationship with power is always more complex than a simple, unidirectional flow from cause to effect. Mansfield explores some manifestations of this relationship between subjectivity and power by analysing the way masochistic discourse attributes and regulates power within literary and theoretical texts. Mansfield reads some of the representations of masochism in twentieth century literature and cultural theory and argues that masochism is significant as a set of literary tropes and formal or aesthetic characteristics that operate by representing the masculine subject’s power as loss.

According to Mansfield, masochism “crosses and recrosses the ostensible boundary between psychopathology and culture, sometimes operating as a scientific category, and sometimes as a metaphor for representation and politics” (ix). In both capacities masochism is a strategy that (consciously or otherwise) recuperates and consolidates power by representing that power as belonging to another. At the centre of Mansfield’s analysis is the basic dualism of the self and other. Through the dramatic reversal of dominance between the two positions, the masochist seeks to bring about the suspension of all difference within this dualism. He does this by himself prescribing or ‘scripting’ the desire of the other, thereby achieving a scene in which he acts as both subject and object. In literary texts, such ‘scripting’ is implicated in considerations of important ethical and political questions.

This manipulation of dialectic relationships is a key feature of Mansfield’s analysis of the masochistic scene, regardless of whether he is referring to the psycho-sexual or the cultural sphere. Mansfield uses the term “indifference” to describe how, in masochistic writing, binary oppositions are carefully controlled:

Masochism produces a structure of the self that completes its own maximization and strengthening by including within it versions of its fragmentation and annihilation. This structural logic occludes the difference between binary opposites without either sublating them in a dialectical synthesis, or dispersing them in a field of radically multiplying

differences. The opposition between centering and decentering is neither surpassed in a higher logical category, nor subverted in a distribution that respects neither pole. This simultaneous refusal and reproduction of binarism represent [sic] a unique structural suspension, that, for want of a better term, I will call *indifference*. (Mansfield 9; original emphasis)

Mansfield argues that indifference is a common feature in twentieth century literature, but also that it characterises much contemporary cultural theory, and that it is particularly relevant to analyses of marginal subject-positions and theories of difference which can often be seen as collapsing otherness into a masochistic “total subject.” He also makes it clear that this kind of covert totalisation is an integral part of masculinity’s self-definition and politics, in contradiction with the abundance of writing that, following Freud, links masochism with femininity or associated stereotypes (submissiveness etc).

In Mansfield’s reading of Sacher-Masoch, the ‘dominant’ woman who tortures and humiliates her male partner is thus understood as a political construction because her role is both desired and initiated by the male masochist. It is incorrect to link radical sexual relationships with radical power relations on the basis of such a performance. Although masochism might appear subversive of traditional patriarchal power, Mansfield finds that it harbours a conservative impulse that recuperates or recycles key aspects of a traditional patriarchal subjectivity. Texts that perform the subordination of the masculine self in relation to an other (or others) often display a similarly masochistic structure, and can embody a similarly conservative impulse. Such texts pre-empt the other, speaking dramatically on their behalf; they utilise a model of power in which the victim, as Deleuze puts it, is actively in search of a torturer (20). Mansfield’s link between masochism and the sublime is in keeping with both the logic and the historical context of the theories of the sublime put forward by Burke and Kant. Both sought to define the sublime as a phenomenon that supported a conservative view of power founded on rational masculinity. Moreover, the masochist’s ‘active search for a torturer’ recalls the em-

phasis on labour or effort and the subject's active role in overcoming the challenge presented by the sublime, as theorised by Furniss.

Another of Deleuze's crucial influences upon Mansfield's study is the emphasis upon the importance of the aesthetic properties of masochistic and sadistic writing – a comparison of which registers vast differences that are central to Deleuze's questioning of a single “sado-masochistic” entity. As I have already noted, Deleuze stresses “the fundamental aesthetic or plastic element in the art of Masoch” (Deleuze 69), arguing that masochistic discourse aims to achieve the stasis of painting or sculpture, evoking a contemplative response – a “profound state of waiting” (70). I will stress the significance of this element in my reading of masculinity in Banville's writing. Banville's formalist approach to art leads to a veneration of aesthetic stasis which, unsurprisingly, in light of the ekphrastic tradition, is also a key site within the contestation of gender.

Mansfield elaborates on this link between a masochistic identity politics and its aesthetic expression by arguing that masochism is structurally and politically compatible with the aesthetic domain of the sublime. He argues that masochism “has been constituted in and by narrative, imagination, and fiction, all of which have been inspired by literature, theater, and so on. In this sense, it is impossible to discuss masochism without simultaneously using the language of art, and its philosophical domain, aesthetics” (25). This recalls how in Kant's discussion of the sublime the language of art resembles that of masochism: “the object is apprehended as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure” (Kant 1987:117). Mansfield suggests that masochism shares and reflects the structure of the sublime because of the peculiar characteristics that arise in modern subjectivity when it tries to establish or overcome its limits (or when it is theorised in terms of power). He finds that “partly due to the way the categories to which the separate terms [the sublime and masochism] belong—the aesthetic and the subjective—[they] have not been able to stop spilling over into one another since the Enlightenment. What they reflect is an impossibility in subjectivity that

does not simply discontinue, and that therefore needs another language, one that is tolerant of its contradictions and meaninglessness” (26). The sublime is the aesthetic space in which the limits of subjectivity are negotiated. Importantly, at the heart of this negotiation is the legacy of the sublime in which gender definitions and stereotypes are contested and interwoven with issues of power.

The dramatisation of power that masochism and the sublime enact is consistent with accounts of masculinity as suddenly under threat or undergoing a crisis. Following the rise of men’s studies and increasing attention to constructions of masculinity during the 1990s, such descriptions are common in the media as well as in contemporary literary analysis:

Crisis is . . . a condition of masculinity itself. Masculine gender identity is never stable; its terms are continually being re-defined and re-negotiated, the gender performance continually being re-staged. Certain themes and tropes inevitably re-appear with regularity, but each era experiences itself in different ways. (Mangan, qtd. in Begnon 2002:90).

According to the logic of masochism, this “crisis” of what was previously assumed to be a stable authority can become a mode of recuperating that authority. While there is no doubt that masculinities can and do change, there is clearly always the possibility of such crises taking the form of a passive aggression, a sublime form of identity in which the threat of dissolution serves as the means for re-affirming a resistant, idealised sense of self.

One particularly important idea in Deleuze’s analysis is the reversal of the traditional psychoanalytic account of desire. As Mansfield notes in a later book,

The defining ideals [of psychoanalysis] for Lacan . . . resonate with the glamorous transcendental signifier, and its commitment to unity of form, the final revelation of truth and a meaningful principle of order. (Mansfield 2000:94)

This transcendental signifier, however, is defined as a lack or absence which correlates with the Freudian notion of castration or lack of a penis – which, for Freud was the fundamental element

of subject formation. As we will see in later chapters, Banville frequently refers to notions of lack or absence and even connects the desire to overcome lack with the writing of a “master signifier.” Mansfield, however, sees this unachievable transcendental signifier as compatible with the masochistic presentation of power, for it is through the failure to achieve the ideal, and the ability to continually frame the self as undergoing a crisis in relation to the ideal, that the masochistic subject can be narrated. If the psychoanalytic account of subjectivity is one form of the greater cultural history of representing masculinity as a drive towards the ideal, the universal or the absolute, then it is one that is open to the subversion of masochism – as Deleuze and Mansfield show. Slavoj Žižek’s foreword to *For They Know Not What They Do* (2002) comments on the weakness of his own earlier work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1992), suggesting that

it basically endorses a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused on the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself; in so doing, it opens the way to the celebration of failure: to the idea that every act ultimately misfires, and that the proper ethical stance is heroically to accept this failure (xii).

When this thesis characterises Banville’s writing as masochistic, it is this “celebration of failure” in relation to notions of self-presence and transcendental signification that I suggest is at work. This celebration should be considered not as something missing from the subject, but rather as a strategic mode of imagination, a lack produced by the subject through which a whole drama of presence and absence, or power and powerlessness, can take place.

### 1.3 The Sublime as Ideology

The accounts of the sublime given by Burke and Kant can be understood as aesthetic ideologies insofar as they submerge a gender politics beneath what purports to be an objective account of aesthetic response. This provides a historical basis for the links between the sublime and representations of masculinity, because they are ideologically compatible and complementary. Mansfield's argument that the sublime is the aesthetic domain of the specific structure of power operating in masochism connects this history with contemporary debates about masculinity and power. These links have become increasingly important for understanding the political implications of the aesthetic across a range of cultural debates as well as in literary studies. The following section will first inquire into Judith Butler's discussion of the interface between psychic and social descriptions of power, and particularly the "figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself" (1997:3) she describes in *The Psychic Life of Power: Essays on Subjection* (1997). I have suggested that the sublime characterises a subjectivity which situates itself in an ambiguous relation to power in order to preserve itself, or to preserve what might be termed an ideal potential – analogous to that sublime potential Mansfield associates with the subversion of pleasure in masochism. Here I argue that the masculine sublime developed above can be situated within what Butler describes as a "passionate attachment" to the power that both subjects us and enables or forms ourselves as active subjects. The aesthetic of the sublime is a commitment to the simultaneous contest of power in which the subject emerges.

Butler argues that the subject is formed through its complex relationship to power, rather than simply existing prior to, or as a consequence of power. One's necessary submission to power in becoming a socialised individual is also what endows one with agency and the ability to resist or change in the face of social pressure. Here, I want to focus on the links

Butler makes with Althusser's notion of interpellation since it most explicitly figures "turning" as a social production of subjectivity. This will provide a closer understanding of the paradoxes of power that Mansfield's notion of masochistic "indifference" responds to, and will also discuss how interpellation is aestheticised in Banville's fiction.

In Althusser's famous scenario, a police officer or other authority "hails" an individual on the street and the individual turns around, thereby recognising him- or herself as the subject of the address. Becoming a subject in this way is described as "interpellation". The hailed individual is constituted as a subject of the law by the recognition that it is really him- or herself that is the object of the law's attention. Althusser's Marxist perspective means that he is concerned with the reproduction of subjects as an aspect of the reproduction of labour power and with the role of ideology in this process (Althusser 1971:125-131). The politico-legal ideology that compels the individual to respond to the hail is one ideology based on one social institution, albeit a representative one; Althusser also highlights education and religion as "ideological state apparatuses" which interpellate subjects by inculcating in them the rules and protocols of social class.

For Butler, interpellation is a key example of the ambivalence of power in relation to the subject. The main aim of her book *The Psychic Life of Power* is to answer the following question: "How . . . is subjection to be thought, and how can it become a site of alteration? A power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming" (11; original emphasis). The relation between the subject and power is difficult at best because power is at times seen as an external force acting upon the subject, but also as the agency that subjects take up and exercise in their lives. Moreover, drawing on the Foucaultian view of power as discursive productivity, Butler reasons that power forms subjects, rather than simply interacting with already existing subjects. Subjection to power is coincident with subject formation, and the emergence of a subjectivity endowed with agency seems inextricable from this ambivalence.



Butler draws attention to psychoanalytic objections to Althusser's argument that interpellation is material and fully explained in terms of material rituals and material institutions. A psychoanalytic account of subject formation could hold that there is always a non-material, unassimilated element that escapes the material process of interpellation. But Butler negotiates this conflict by arguing that there is a sense in which the failure of interpellation to fully shape the subject—for instance, the exclusion of an immaterial Other from the symbolic order (and from the determination of interpellation) just as the subject enters it, by which the “split subject” of psychoanalysis is created—is valuable because it helps explain why individuals may seek to make themselves subject to a law. Citing Althusser's account of his readiness to surrender to the law after having murdered his wife,<sup>6</sup> Butler describes conscience as a “passionate attachment” which “is not beyond interpellation; rather, it forms the passionate circle in which the subject becomes ensnared by its own state” (129). At least as far as conscience is concerned, Butler can account for the psychic excess of interpellation in terms of a desire for subjection to the law that, while outside the subject of interpellation, remains connected to it through a negative relation of desire. While Butler's explanation does not entirely dismiss the immaterial aspect of self outside interpellation, it ties it to the material conditions of subject formation and the complex valencies of power produced therein. Therefore, “the failure of interpellation is to be found precisely in the passionate attachment that also allows it to work” (129).

Within Butler's discussion we can recognise Mansfield's notion of “indifference” as a possible outcome of the ambivalence inherent in the subject's relation to power. As Butler comments in her introduction,

Where conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but in an ambivalent way; in fact, the power

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<sup>6</sup> Althusser is, of course, one of the sources for the character of Axel Vander, who feeds his wife an overdose of pills in *Shroud* (2002).

assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination. This conclusion is not to be thought of as (a) a resistance that is *really* a recuperation of power or (b) a recuperation that is *really* a resistance. It is both at once, and this ambivalence forms the bind of agency. (13; original emphasis)

In other words, the ambivalence presented by the subject's relation to power can produce a non-distinction or "indifference" in terms of the direction and ownership of power. This indifference is also a possible outcome in terms of Althusser's point that the mastery of material practices or rituals associated with a particular ideology implies submission to its terms. Butler describes Althusser's point by saying that "the binary frame of mastery/submission is forfeited" (117), and that subject formation becomes possible in the "simultaneity of mastery as submission" (117). Of course, Butler also points out that this problem is exacerbated by the grammatical constraints of describing the subject's relation to power too ("it is almost impossible to ask after the genealogy of [the subject's] construction without presupposing that construction in asking the question" (117)). In fact, Butler's entire argument relies on Foucault's recognition that the subject is constituted by the discourses in which it is found. This "simultaneity of mastery as submission" as a description of the subject's relation to power is, therefore, the paradox in which the languages of masochism and the sublime find their space of opportunity, for both exist in the liminal state where mastery and submission, self and other, cause and effect, and other such binary distinctions become blurred.

The ideology of the aesthetic, to use Terry Eagleton's phrase, can also be said to interpellate subjects. Aesthetic experience is in fact exemplary of the figure of turning Butler describes, since the aesthetic is commonly theorised as the supervention of an awareness of shared affective response – a turning toward the law of the collective. According to the Kantian tradition, aesthetic experience produces a reflexive turn whereby the individual response feeds back into a recognition of a universal principle that was hidden in it all along. Within aesthetics, the sublime is where this turn is most pronounced but at the same time most prob-

lematic, since it may tend towards a state of indifference as the limits of the subject are tested.

In Eagleton's view, both ideology and the aesthetic describe a kind of subjective response which seemingly 'bridges the gap' between private thoughts and general truths. The substance of both concepts is enshrined in the innermost thoughts and emotions of the subject, yet they seem to claim more than this: they are also intersubjective and assert truths that might hold for everyone. They both take the form of a process of consent to a general law or idea through the approbation of individual subjects who 'just happen' to agree with it. Eagleton sees this form as a crucial element in the evolution of modern subjectivity under capitalism, arguing that

The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order, in contrast to the coercive apparatus of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections. And this is equivalent to saying that power in such an order has become *aestheticized*. It is at one with the body's spontaneous impulses, entwined with sensibility and the affections, lived out in unreflective custom. (Eagleton 1990:20; original emphasis)

Kant's aesthetic, according to Eagleton, becomes a vehicle for coordinating a range of modern polarities: the particular and the general, the material and the abstract, the sensuous and the rational, the individual and the universal. This is because in the aesthetic, "[w]hat is from one viewpoint an absolute rightness is from another viewpoint just something I happen to feel: but that 'happen' is *essential*." (Eagleton qtd. in Regan 1992:25; original emphasis). Eagleton argues that this aesthetic coordination is an effect of power that regulates modern subjects from within:

Aesthetic pleasure cannot be *compelled*; and yet somehow it is, for all that. The ethico-aesthetic subject – the subject of bourgeois hegemony – is the one who, in Kant's phrase,

gives the law to itself and who thus lives its necessity as freedom. The pleasures of the aesthetic are in this sense masochistic: as with bourgeois ideology, the delight that matters is our free complicity with what subjects us, so that we can ‘work all by ourselves.’” (ibid.)

Eagleton’s description of the ethico-aesthetic subject draws parallels with Butler’s notion of passionate attachment as well as with the discourse of masochism analysed by Mansfield. Our “free complicity” with power—our recognition that our innermost sensations and feelings are representative, normal, or culturally sanctioned instances of a general truth—reflects a formation of subjectivity that retains an intimate relationship with subjection. Once this formation is established, individuals become in some sense legislators to themselves, and literature can begin to reflect the subject in terms of self-examination, negotiation and internalisation of social laws, and self-improvement while correlating these with material consequences of punishment and reward. As long as aesthetic pleasure resonates with the modern ideals of subjectivity, it can reproduce the masochistic logic of the sublime.

We might note here that the apparent conjunction of the universal and the particular is a feature of many of Banville’s narratives. If we think of the historian of *The Newton Letter* or Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*, we find individuals whose abstract framework of knowledge is swept aside by the aesthetic experience of unquestionable “truth” or “universality.” These revelations promise a powerful truth, yet they never fully deliver. The narrator gets lost in the contemplation of the particular and claims that his understanding of the relations between things—or his system of knowledge—breaks down, leaving all meaning isolated in particularity. We may apply Althusser’s notion of ideological recognition and misrecognition to these events in Banville’s fiction. The (lack of) true development and self-understanding in his protagonists revolves around a certain process of misprision, relinquishment and re-investment in a new object or desire. To quote the narrator of *Athena*, their “powers of misrecognition [are] prodigious” (89).

Aesthetic experiences or judgments are an indicator of the narrator's reliability throughout Banville's oeuvre. For instance, our distrust of Freddie Montgomery is established through the confusion in his judgment between the value of the painting he steals, and the value of human life (in the form of Josie Bell, the girl he murders). Freddie seemingly distorts the everyday distinction between art and life by giving the painted illusion great importance and forgetting the ethical value of a real life. This confusion is also emphasised by the contrast between Freddie's confident and articulate retrospective narration and his desperate and ill-planned actions. "His" reliability is further undermined in the following novels by his inability to—and, perhaps more significantly, his lack of interest in—distinguishing between authentic and fake paintings.

In a key example from *The Book of Evidence*, a figure of turning occurs at a critical moment in the text when the narrator first encounters the painting that will lead him to murder:

It struck me that the perspective of this scene was wrong somehow. Things seemed not to recede as they should, but to be arrayed before me – the furniture, the open window, the lawn and river and far-off mountains – as if they were not being looked at but were themselves looking, intent upon a vanishing-point here, inside the room. I turned then, and saw myself turning as I turned, as I seem to myself to be turning still, as I sometimes imagine I will be turning always, as if this might be my punishment, my damnation, just this breathless, blurred, eternal turning towards her. (78)

Here, the narrator describes turning as a self-reflexive movement that places himself under scrutiny, instead of the room and window scene, or the painting he turns to view. Besides its similarity to Lacan's theory of the gaze and the scene of Althusser's interpellation, the scene styles 'turning' as a specifically aesthetic stasis, an irrecoverable moment that combines past, present and future in which the narrator's guilt is confirmed. The effect of this is to dramatise the Other's possession of the gaze, and to present the narrator as temporally and spatially

suspended. Freddie metaphorically imprisons himself in the moment of aesthetic recognition, which is also the moment that he is subjected to the gaze of the painting. The reader is well aware of the irony of this imprisonment since Freddie is of course writing his confession in jail.

Freddie's encounter with the painting is constructed in accordance with the 'masculine sublime' outlined in this chapter. This central episode in the novel subordinates Freddie to the object he would seek to know and command. The epistemological project he abandoned in giving up his scientific career has transposed itself into the realm of art and visuality, yet this too seems to elude his control. By presenting Freddie in this way, Banville makes subjection and aesthetic suspension the defining characteristics of his male art viewers. In the *Frames* trilogy the obsession with high art becomes the central platform for these characteristics, though they are present in the earlier and subsequent fictions as well. Banville valorises high art, and while there may be some self-satire on Banville's part in addition to the undercutting of narrative reliability through the misrecognitions of his narrators noted above, ultimately the value of canonical works of genius, and the formation of the viewer's position as one of subjection or subjective loss in relation to them, is reaffirmed.

The significance of Banville's use of high art as a central element in his fiction—as an aesthetic space for the production and reproduction of a masculine subject structured by the sublime—might be understood in terms of the distinction between pleasure and desire as well. Steven Connor's discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass culture concludes that "there turns out to be no absolute distinction between authentic art and mass culture" and that both involve a "failure of gratification" (qtd. in Regan 209). Instead, Connor points to the difference in the form that this frustration takes. "Art" and "mass culture" are distinguished, he argues, "not in terms of value as opposed to pleasure, or even as sublimated pleasure as opposed to brute gratification, but in terms of a higher as opposed to a lower form of frustration" (209). The subject of mass culture in Adorno and Horkheimer is duped by the

illusion of a gratification that never arrives: its frustration is imposed upon it by the “culture industry.” By contrast, the subject of “authentic art,” in which Connor identifies a “higher . . . form of frustration” (209) retains a degree of agency (and therefore power) in its relation to pleasure by actively denying the possibility of gratification. Thus the two subject positions are fundamentally distinguished by the attitude each takes towards power. Connor sees the subject of “authentic” art as possibly masochistic, but merely in appearance:

Though the negations [of pleasure] of authentic art allow the reconstitution of a certain masochistic pleasure in the severe rapture of the mystic . . . their real value lies in their very refusal of the possibility of pleasure; for it is the very absoluteness of this absolute refusal which opens up a chink of utopian possibility, the purely negative hope of a transcendence in the form of a happiness in which desire and gratification would no longer be alienated. (209-10)

Yet the negation of pleasure that Connor finds in Adorno and Horkheimer’s account appears, in light of Mansfield’s analysis, even more fundamentally masochistic than Connor allows. The denial of pleasure needs no “reconstitution” into masochistic pleasure (via mysticism, for instance), for it is already inherent as an element of purely theoretical excitement in the process of imagining the “absoluteness” of “absolute refusal”. To the denial of pleasure is attached a “chink of utopian possibility” which, against the logic that “absolute” denial implies, seems to be intensified in proportion to the absolute law that prohibits it. The distinction Connor seeks in this passage cannot break free of the blurred boundaries of its two competing aspects: in the manner of Derrida’s logic of the supplement, one aspect (utopian possibility) seeks to add to that which is already replete (absolute denial). What Connor actually describes here is a state of Mansfieldian “indifference” – the operation of a purported distinction (pleasure is possible/pleasure is impossible) as an unresolved and unresolvable totality. There is no point at which the two poles of the opposition are to be separated because the “negative hope of a

transcendence” relies on its denial for its very articulation.

In Connor’s characterisation of the viewer of “authentic art,” the separation of pleasure and value leads to a recuperation of the possibility of pleasure through its very denial. The contrapurposefulness of the sublime is apparent here, when the ‘difficulty’ or frustration of pleasure high art supposedly offers its viewers leads to the reproduction of the desire for that pleasure. While this situation resonates strongly with the role of artworks in Banville’s fiction, we might note that Banville’s protagonists generally derive great pleasure (at least initially) from their experience of artworks and it is often only later that their over-valuation of art is called into question. The challenge artworks pose as a realm of the ideal that Banville’s protagonists aspire to but cannot master confounds the direct creation of pleasure. Their inability to wield a controlling gaze, or successfully master the instrumental knowledge and judgment of the art critic eventually ensures this, but at the same time it arranges for the possibility of a sublime hope, an aspiration that is the stronger for its disavowal.

In the next sections, I turn to an important version of the ‘masculine sublime’ as I have described it so far, deriving from the fact that Banville’s writing generally takes a retrospective, confessional point of view. While I have given a theoretical account of the connections between Banville’s aesthetics and issues of power and gender, I have had little to say about the style and organisation of the masculine point of view that each of Banville’s novels explores in a slightly different way, nor have I yet connected my outline of the ‘masculine sublime’ to Banville’s other key pre-occupation: history.



#### 1.4 Counter-memory

*Nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial!*<sup>7</sup>

John Banville's foray into travel writing, *Prague Pictures* (2003), begins on a characteristically deprecatory note: the first line warns us, in a consciously Prufrockian manner, that "[t]his is not a guidebook, nor was meant to be." "As to what it is," Banville continues, "that is harder to say. A handful of recollections, variations on a theme. An effort to conjure a place by a mingled effort of memory and imagination. A sad song of love to a beloved that can never reciprocate" (i). This self-effacing lament for the unresponsive love object offers another point of entry into Banville's better known writing – that work which is officially categorised as fictional. Like the indistinct, pearly romanticism of Josef Sudek's photographs of Prague, Banville's "sad song of love"—that recalls, among other things, Roland Barthes' "amorous subject"—is typical of the nostalgic voice he has developed throughout his fictional works insofar as it suggests a twofold attitude or relationship of desire: on one hand desire can focus on redeeming absence, even when it is impossible; on the other hand lies the positivity of desire – particularly its constructive and directive force for writing. *Nostos*—the return home—and *algia*—longing or desire—are fundamental elements that shape the presentation of masculinity in Banville's fiction.

This nostalgic impulse in Banville's work can be explored through the distinction Nicholas Andrew Miller makes between the subject of history and the subject of memory in Irish modernist culture. He suggests that

[historical inquiry's] effect is the production - and more or less constant reproduction - of human beings as knowers of the past . . . [and] as rational subjects whose stability is

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<sup>7</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvii.

commensurate with their capacity to know. Memory's goal, on the other hand, is never a comprehensive and final knowledge of the past or its preservation, but a process of continuous renegotiation of selfhood in relation to that past. (8)

Written history mediates between our present selves and the past, and can make us forget the past's illegibility or invisibility – the very fact of the past's *not* being here and now. History implies a power to overcome this absence, and provides us with the power to objectify, to collectively textualise and thus “recognise” the past in discourse. “Memory,” in Miller's discussion, does not produce a stable historical subject of this kind. Instead, it creates another subjectivity that openly announces that its reproduction of the past is not an objective, shared knowledge, but an orientation of the self guided by conscious or unconscious desire. “The rememberer,” Miller suggests, “coheres no longer within the world of ideally legible facts, the world of adequate historical knowing, but instead within an erotics of memory” (38).

Miller raises this distinction between memory and history (and their respective subjectivities of desiring or becoming versus stable historicity) in relation to Irish modernism in order to consider the claim sometimes made that modernism denies or departs from history. He points out that historical discourse itself always has an inherently “lethal” quality: “the ‘recovery’ of the past for knowledge,” he writes, “will always gravitate toward an ambivalent process of re-presentation and re-burial because knowing the past is always a matter of specifying a thing that is inaccessible in itself” (27).<sup>8</sup> Against a range of theoretical positions—from New Critical to postcolonial—that have too readily critiqued modernism as ahistorical, Miller argues that Irish modernism is concerned with the past through a revitalising form of memory: “What modernism leaves behind are strategies for engaging the past that render history

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<sup>8</sup> This lethal quality is, of course, as grave a danger to the thesis writer as it is to the professional historian. I take it as given that my thesis participates in a discourse and set of institutionalised requirements that make this similarity inevitable, and can only hope that by taking the reflexivity of Banville's perspective on history as my subject matter this thesis will explore as fully as possible the ways in which Banville's texts offer various kinds of resistance to the authoritative inscription of “lethal” facts.

factually dead; what modernism in all periods and forms “makes new” is nothing other than memory – the active, variable, ambivalent process that continuously opens up the narrative of history to new possibilities” (7). The imagery of death and re-birth Miller employs underscores the past-present relationship in terms of the ability of new generations to re-imagine their culture, and thereby escape from the immobility of a solidified, disciplined history. Rather than subsuming its audience under the certainty of a final, “lethal” knowledge of the past (as is typically produced by historical discourse and by many kinds of public memorial), counter-memorial perspectives continuously seek out a far more problematic individual relation to the past which incorporates a whole range of memories and non-rational influences that lie outside the conventions and methods of historiography.

This line of argument recalls Michel Foucault’s use of the term “counter-memory,” under which he attacked the tendency of modernist historiography to stabilise and naturalise historical narrative. “History becomes ‘effective,’” Foucault contends, “to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself” (1977:154). An analogy is Barthes’ idea of the subjectively determined point in a photographic image that he calls the “punctum” – an object or quality that produces a strong affective response experienced as some sort of “prick” or disruption that constitutes the viewer’s special relation to the image. This special relation, that ‘takes over’ the otherwise ordinary, culturally legible arena of the photograph, approximates the discontinuity and the highly personal, interiorised scope of counter-memory.<sup>9</sup> Against the abstract, disciplined narrative of cause and effect, counter-memory focuses on non-rational effects and the production of multiplicities and possibilities, rather than fortification of stable historical subjects.<sup>10</sup> Foucault also emphasises the political dimension of such history, arguing

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<sup>9</sup> Barthes links the presence of the punctum with the partially obscured or misplaced, rather than clearly represented, object; with erotic as opposed to the pornographic; and with the desire to “inhabit” rather than to visit as a tourist (Barthes 2000:3-60).

<sup>10</sup> Along similar lines, Vicki Mahaffey has deployed the philosophical toolbox of Deleuze and Guattari to argue,

that an event “is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it” (ibid.). I will elaborate on this point further in the next section, in relation to the work of Hayden White and F.R. Ankersmit.

For now, we can see that Miller’s distinction is of considerable use for understanding Banville’s fiction. Firstly, this is because most of Banville’s novels take the form of ostensibly private journals or accounts written down outside the frame of some official ‘History.’ At no time is historical realism taken for granted – instead it is questioned or subjected to relentless irony. The Newton biographer’s letter, to take an obvious example, begins at the point when he has given up on scholarship and instead begins to write instead about the lives of those immediately around him. He writes a journal because he can no longer write biography, which has come to seem “lethal.” A fellow biographer, he notes, “[r]eminded me of an embalmer. Which, come to think of it, is apt . . . out come the syringe and the formalin. That is what I was doing too, embalming old N.’s big corpse” (NL 25). In framing *Birchwood*, the narrator, Gabriel Godkin, inverts a line from Dante in order to make the point that he will narrate, but not interpret, his story – he will tell “all of it, if not its meaning, the story of the fall and rise of Birchwood” (B 11). Similarly, Freddie Montgomery hopes his “evidence” is going to be, if not read out in court, at least archived alongside what he calls “the other, official fictions” (BE 220). Banville’s fictional departures from the ‘real’ histories of Copernicus,<sup>11</sup> Kepler and Anthony Blunt also fit into this category.

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at least in the case of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce, that Ireland’s long history of domination, political uprising and dispersed and mobile centres of power has produced a tendency towards experimental writings that articulate multi-faceted, non-teleological forms of desire (1997:4). The scepticism towards conventional historicism Mahaffey identifies in these writers complements the points made by Miller and Foucault, and emphasises that renewing the imaginative relation to the past and salvaging agency or power are important in such accounts of Irish writing. In Banville’s case, however, I argue that the ‘erotic’ investment in negation produces a sublime relationship, whereby the repeatedly announced inability to produce a singular, teleological image of the past is a way of controlling and preserving the possibility of such an image.

<sup>11</sup> This kind of departure is itself self-consciously dramatised in *Doctor Copernicus* through the intrusion of Rheticus’s narrative. Rheticus’s thwarted ambitions motivate his malicious revisionism in which he tries to attack the Copernicus who has been revered and immortalised by history. See McCarthy 131.

Banville's fictions move away from History in the sense that they reject its authoritative grip on the past and instead offer a less reliable, but more particularised and self-conscious narrative. As Richard Kearney put it, Banville "shares the post-Joycean obsession with the possibility/impossibility of writing, and more particularly with the problematic rapport between narrative and history" (91). Yet while Banville's fiction disavows the possibility of achieving the systematic mastery of a philosophical or historical totality, it does not entirely reject it. The reading of Banville's fiction as a 'supreme fiction'—that is, a fiction of totality—by Joseph McMinn is also implicitly based on this kind of relationship to historical and narrative closure. Like George Steiner's conclusions in *Nostalgia for the Absolute* that the social sciences have thrown up discourses (Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology) as replacements for the mythic explanatory function of religion, McMinn sees Banville's art as a self-conscious, personal mythology. McMinn acknowledges that "there may no longer be any hope of a convincing master narrative, but most of Banville's characters wish there were" (1999:7). Miller's notion of counter-memory explains exactly this interiorisation of one's relation to the past in which totalising historical truths or facts are ostensibly rejected, but there remains the tiniest "hope" or "wish" for their return.

Secondly, Miller's distinction is useful because it specifies the "erotic" aspect to counter-memorial subjectivity. While Patricia Coughlan eschews claiming a place for the erotic among "the big categories—ideological, aesthetic, philosophical, and ethical" (2006:82) in Banville criticism, her analysis of character and gender in structural terms shows that it is crucial to all of these ways of looking at the texts. I contend that the subject, or voice, of Banville's novels speaks or writes out of what Peter Brooks calls "narrative desire" – a desire to know or possess the other that is amplified by the "epistemophilic" qualities of writing and reading processes (Brooks 7-8).<sup>12</sup> This connects the overt eroticism Coughlan discusses with the

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<sup>12</sup> Brooks' psychoanalytic perspective links epistemophilia with the inadequacy of the child's exploration of sexuality, which, he argues, "[sets] up a model of the desire to know as an inherently unsatisfiable, Faustian project" (9). For my purposes, the strength of such an approach lies not in its psychodynamic or mythic explanations

search for systematic, instrumental knowledge – the “masterbuilder” narrative familiar from many of Banville’s works. Eroticism may be a marker for the over-investment Banville’s male protagonists make in this regard, since they repeatedly misconstrue “intellectual” and “sexual” evidence (to make a distinction that must later be dismantled) in much the same ways. Victor Maskell, in *The Untouchable*, is typical of this “voice” in Banville’s fiction when he writes: “I am beset constantly by a feeling the only name for which I can think of is nostalgia. Great hot waves of remembrance wash through me” (20). The debates about subjectivity and ethics that have already taken place in Banville criticism will inevitably be broadened by a reading of masculinity in Banville’s fictions in which the interconnected issues of representation, aesthetics and power are examined in terms of desire rather than of epistemology.

Miller’s discussion of counter-memorials also emphasises that the subject-position authorised by historical narratives tends to be an inherently performative one. By referencing certain kinds of discursive practices associated with the general field of history (biography, autobiography, history of science, art history), yet favouring a perspective embodied in first-person confessional texts that reject the notion of truly objective historical narration, it could be argued that Banville finds neither the writing subject nor the historical subject to be a stable, accessible “being” existing prior to discourse, but that both are stubbornly elusive accretions of “citations” or textual acts. Counter-memory tells us less about the objects of history than about the investment such objects command as “facts.” At times this seems to conflict with the aestheticising impulse that seeks to unite subject and idealised object in a satisfying resolution or “closure” so often found in Banville’s fiction. Banville’s fictions study the desire to totalise, that is, to control or possess certain kinds of perception or knowledge (including stable his-

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of desire but in the more general relationship he outlines between body and text: “An aesthetics of narrative embodiment insists that the body is only apparently lacking in meaning, that it can be semiotically retrieved. Along with the semiotization of the body goes what we might call the somatization of story: the implicit claim that the body is a key sign in narrative and a central nexus of narrative meanings” (25). This distinction and interrelation between body and text is characteristic of the distinction Banville makes between “art” and “life” (Banville 1981b:10), and signals the metaphysics of presence towards which his writing ultimately reaches. As we will see, this “semiotization of the body” is shaped by Banville’s perspectives on masculinity.

torical truth), and present alternative narratives of self as means of coming to terms with the inaccessible past.

Throughout this thesis I will argue that this counter-memorial writing is the location of a masculine sublime, the specific construction of subjectivity that defines Banville's presentation of masculinity, not so much in terms of male sociality, but rather through philosophical and literary tropes. In the textualisation of an event, or the description of materiality, the masculine subject is characterised by the elated power to delimit or define some piece of knowledge, and the subsequent failure of this very process. By committing himself to a counter-memorial project, an appropriation of power and the construction of an independent identity seem to be made possible but, as I will argue, this possibility is repeatedly foreclosed, and appears successful only in temporary, aesthetic terms.

## 1.5 An Historical Sublime

Keeping in mind the development of the sublime as an aesthetic category, I will develop the case that the subject position associated with counter-memorials is consistent with a specifically (anti-)historical version of the sublime. This enlarges upon the sense in which Banville's writing is centred upon a form of masculine subjectivity constructed through certain experiences that cannot be rationalised or represented.

Hayden White is a key objector to the scientific view of history that holds the past to be a fully knowable and rationalisable object. In the chapter "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation" he draws his evidence from the transformation of historical practices during the 19th century, in which a "disciplining of the imagination" (66) occurred that was essential to the constitution of modern academic history. Alongside, and in competition with, the claims for the scientific status of history (notably in Marxist thought), there arose the humanist historical tradition guided by what White calls an "aesthetic regulation" (68) of the historian's judgment that shaped the "disciplined" historical discourse that exists today. Such aesthetic regulation "authorize[s] the attitudes that the socially responsible historian properly assumes . . . [including] respect for the "individuality," "uniqueness," and "ineffability" of historical entities, sensitivity to the "richness" and "variety" of the historical field, and a faith in the "unity" that makes of finite sets of historical particulars comprehensible wholes" (71). A 'standardised' historical consciousness of this sort encouraged the exclusion of "improper" historical objects and methods, and constructed an objective, putatively value-free discourse that could claim authority over the past.

White assigns aesthetic terms to this process, saying that "insofar as the disciplinization of history entailed regulation . . . discipline consisted in subordinating written history to the categories of the 'beautiful' and suppressing those of the 'sublime'" (66-7). This regulation is at



once aesthetic and political; it “had to be undertaken if history considered as a kind of knowledge was to be established as arbitrator of the realism of contending political programs” (65). In contrast to this orderly historical discipline, “sublime” history might be a history which acknowledges the terrifying incomprehensibility of the past and that resists the domesticating effects of narrative and the “beautiful” values guiding conventional historical understanding. White argues that although dangerous for its utopianism and apparent connections with fascism, the “sublime” type of history might at times be necessary in order to resist the established politics of interpretation in which “good sense” and narrative closure must prevail.<sup>13</sup>

We have already seen how Miller’s contrast between counter-memorials and “History” involved different concepts of subjectivity that highlight the ways in which writing about the past can confirm or challenge a dominant reality. Miller’s counter-memorials also question the orderly regulation of historical discourse. Perhaps it is no coincidence then that both White and Miller illustrate their theories by discussing responses to the Holocaust. Both writers link historical knowledge with the elision of the unrepresentable and the rationalisation that confers upon history the status of an adequate reconstruction of past events.<sup>14</sup> For both Miller and White there is a far more discomfiting and honest possibility: that the meaninglessness of history, or the multiplicity of meanings, ought at times to be recognised, rather than erased by textualisations (whether they be in the form of statues or narratives) that supplant individual memories with officially sanctioned but “lethal” histories.

This aesthetic distinction correlates strongly with the way Banville’s fiction engages

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<sup>13</sup> Joep Leerssen’s discussion of *Nebeneinander* (spectacle, “the plastic principle of spatial arrangement” (66)) and *Nacheinander* (narrative, “the dramatic principle of temporal-evenemential arrangement” (ibid.)) in 19th century Irish literature relates these terms to the development of narrative history out of an antiquarianism that focused on objects and artefacts rather than on temporal change. Leerssen too describes the development of a historical sense within Irish writing through aesthetic reference points, in this case using “the opposition made famous by Lessing’s *Laokoon*.” (ibid.). It is an interesting point, given Banville’s thematic interest in paintings and statues, since it seems to link a sublime notion of history with Banville’s aesthetic of stasis or ‘suspension’ in a number of his novels.

<sup>14</sup> Miller hints at the notion of the unrepresentable that is linked to the sublime by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. (Miller 34, n14).

with the past. In fact, this memorial dimension is the first way in which subjectivity is structured by the dynamics of the sublime in Banville's fiction. The plots of his novels tend to rest on the resolution of the asymmetry between the perspectives of the present and the past. Each protagonist is focused on telling about their past,<sup>15</sup> but is defined by the ways in which answers inevitably elude them. As important as the desire for knowledge is the fact that a certain ideal truth remains unrepresentable and inaccessible. Indeed, the sublime can be conceived not as a glimpse of the numinous, but rather as the action of defining or delimiting an identity (Cheetham 1995).

*Kepler* provides a useful reference point here: the end of the protagonist's life is presented as a recapitulation of all the crises he has faced before, and emphasises the structure of abandonment and renewed desire that defines his intellectual work :

When he finished the *Somnium*, there had been another crisis, as he had known there would be. What was it, this wanton urge to destroy the work of his intellect and rush out on crazy voyages into the real world? It had seemed to him in Sagan that he was haunted, not by a ghost but something like a memory so vivid that at times it seemed about to conjure itself into a physical presence. It was as if he had mislaid some precious small thing, and forgotten about it, and yet was tormented by the loss (190).

The phrase "the real world" indicates the distinction Banville's protagonists maintain between intellection and the external "real." There is always a division between the space of thought and that of the so-called "ordinary" world. Secondly, the desire Kepler experiences, described in terms of memory and forgetting, is more important than it initially seems. This rush towards the "real world" could be simply related to his admiration for 'men of action' like the mercenary Felix. Alternatively, the desire for this "small precious thing" seems to approximate

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<sup>15</sup> *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* are ostensibly historical novels written mostly in the third-person, but they too undermine historical realism in a variety of ways.

the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the object that coordinates what are really our narcissistic desires for ‘wholeness’ imaged as an external, desirable other. Indeed, we could go so far as to read White’s discussion of the beautiful and the sublime in terms of the distinction between the Lacanian symbolic and the Real:

[t]o come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist, so that, ultimately, desire is most interested not in fully attaining the object of desire but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist. Because desire is articulated through fantasy, it is driven to some extent by its own impossibility. (Felluga 2003)

Similarly, to actually confront a ‘sublime’ historical reality might reveal the fundamental meaninglessness (or artificiality) of the ‘beautiful’ narrative order. Such a ‘beautiful’ order might then be understood in terms of symbolic fantasy (an historical ego ideal), with the “sublime” awareness as the intrusion of the Real—that is, the intrusion of the absence of reality—which may threaten to shatter the appeal of the beautiful for us, but may equally reset our desire to resolve this antagonism along a new path.

F.R. Ankersmit has also theorised on the relation between history and the sublime. In fact, he quotes a characteristic Banvillean moment from *Eclipse* in his book *Sublime Historical Experience*, which argues that the sublime is crucial to the way in which historical identities are made, transformed and lost through time. The quote from the early stages of *Eclipse* (32-3) depicts the narrator, Alexander Cleave, becoming aware of the objects around him as somehow “transfigured,” and then including himself in this perception, as if he were another person. Cleave seems to objectify himself, to step out of the usual frame of perception that constitutes selfhood. Ankersmit argues that

sublime experience then is the kind of experience inviting or necessitating us to discard or to dissociate a former self . . . [It] is then the kind of experience forcing us to abandon

the position in which we still coincide with ourselves and to exchange this for a position where we relate to ourselves in the most literal sense of the word, hence, as if we were *two* persons instead of just *one*. (347; original emphasis)

This is the individual-scale version of Ankersmit's argument that certain historical events are sublime because they can "dissolve the historical identity of a previous period and replace it with a new one" (365). Ankersmit makes the parallel between revolutionary changes in social perspective (drawing on examples such as the French Revolution and the condemnation of Socrates) and individual ones, in much the same way as White describes the emergence of a sublime that is world-historical but is also the force that "alone can goad living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and for their children" (White 72).

Interestingly, in his example from *Eclipse*, Ankersmit does not mention the link between Cleave's sense of an objectified self and the trauma of Cass's suicide.<sup>16</sup> He should, because his argument depends on an experience of trauma so powerful that it creates a dissociation, a "movement of derealization by which reality is robbed of its threatening potentialities" (336) which he sees as fundamentally similar to the derealization produced by the sublime. Ankersmit likens the sublime to trauma in that both create a rift between the past and present self, and both must be absorbed and dealt with as an ineluctable, identity-changing event. He might have suggested that Cleave's situation in *Eclipse* (highlighted by the choice of name Banville has given him) exemplifies just such a self-transforming trauma, though it is complicated by the fact that Cleave seems to suffer from Cass's death unconsciously. That is, it is unclear on what level Cleave knows about his daughter's death; he is haunted by her *before* he knows of her death, introducing an added complexity to the narrative.

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<sup>16</sup> Just after the passage Ankersmit quotes is the following: "Was it the same phial of precious ichor, still inside me, that spilled in the cinema that afternoon, and that I carry in me yet, and that yet will overflow at the slightest movement, the slightest misbeat of my heart?" (33). This becomes significant retrospectively when Lydia accuses Alexander of having known about Cass's death on some level, suggesting that it was the reason for his breakdown.

Ankersmit's ideas build on the point that Banville's fictions "depart from History," for they describe a subjectivity that relies upon a schism with the past for its constitution and regulation. Such a break is the opposite of the unifying continuity assumed by conventional historiography. This is the kind of experience Banville's novels dramatise: divided selves (*Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus*, *Mefisto*), personal pasts that are difficult to bring to light (*Ghosts*, *Athena*, *The Sea*), confessional narratives digesting the shock of a public 'outing' (*The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse*, *Shroud*). All involve a dislocation or interruption between the protagonist's sense of his past self and the present, writing self, and a desire to overcome this break, in large part because it is an impossible, self-sustaining task.

A notable addition to these expositions of a historical sublime is Conor McCarthy's chapter "Irish Metahistories: John Banville and the revisionist debate," (2000) which I discuss in detail in Chapter Three. McCarthy suggests that the "deliberate articulation of aesthetic experience with what [Jurgen Habermas] calls 'life-history' actually serves to move that aesthetic back out of its putatively autonomous sphere, and reaffiliate it with matters of 'truth and justice.'" He shows that we can read Banville as someone who "writes about individuals whose life-experiences impinge on their intellectual or aesthetic theories in such a way as to radically alter them or to show up their ethical contradictions" (83). While this is a productive perspective on Banville's novels, it nonetheless preserves the distinction between the aesthetic and 'real historical life,' also noted above in relation to *Kepler*. My argument is that Banville's characters relate themselves to what they think of as the real through a sublime relation, like that indicated by the epigraph to *The Newton Letter*: "I seem to have been only as a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me" (NL i). This weakens the ethical force of McCarthy's claim, since, as we have seen this kind of relation is predicated upon 'impossible' objects of desire or knowledge that, through sublime intuition, might somehow be possessed. In Banville's fiction it is simply the continuance of

this complex relation that is produced by the articulation between aesthetic experience and 'life-history' McCarthy describes, rather than a fully determined grasp of such ideals as "truth and justice." Furthermore, many of the later novels (with which McCarthy is not directly concerned) focus explicitly on ways in which aesthetic experience is unethical, or at the very least dubious and self-deceiving.

## 1.6 “A Body You Don’t Really Want”

So far, this thesis has linked its reading of gender in Banville’s fiction to subjective attitudes related to, or operating through, the logic of the sublime. It argues that masculinity in these books is structured by the sublime, and has explored ways in which Banville’s treatment of memory and history contribute to this process. Next, what must be integrated with this account is a more objective assessment of the ways in which masculinity and femininity are presented in the texts. To do this, I examine the ways in which characters are vehicles for representations of gender traits, but ground this in a broader consideration of the philosophical opposition between abstract rationality and sensory or material experience as it is articulated through those gender traits. This opposition is usually associated with philosophy that defends the existence of a non-material reality of some kind, and is an important structure in Banville’s fiction – particularly in the form of the Kantian dualism of the sensible and the intelligible. It is an opposition that has been noted by Banville’s critics already, but here I propose to analyse it specifically in terms of Banville’s construction of masculinity. Thus, what follows offers a basis for examining the gender tropes in Banville’s fiction in terms of the philosophical values and traditions his writing engages with.

Banville commented on the intelligible/sensible dualism when he noted “a strain which runs through all the books, the tension between art and nature, ideas and life, and so on. It’s not a very original concern, to say the least, but I hope I am looking at it from new, or at least interesting perspectives” (Banville 1981b:10). While this statement obviously refers to his first four or five novels, it is relevant to the later works as well. Many of his characters have a fascination with phenomenological questions in which it seems possible to distinguish between an ordinary experience and an “authentic” one, or in which a virtual reality, often based upon art or memory, becomes more vivid than the narrator’s present time. Regardless of how

it is described, there exists a hierarchical division between subjective experiences associated with intellect and judgment and the ‘lower,’ more mundane experiences of the senses. My attention to this distinction as a way of understanding masculinity in Banville’s fiction will intersect in several ways with the discussions on the sublime as a feature of subjectivity that has been established above.

The intelligible/sensible, or mind/body, distinction has been an enormously influential method of carving up reality within Western philosophy. It has its modern source in Descartes’ foundational separation of thinking from the body and its senses (Cartesianism), but can be traced back to classical Greek thought in other forms, and has played a significant role in modern European cultural history. Banville’s use of the scientific revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries as a reference point in the science tetralogy takes up this split by representing and recontextualising the clash between metaphysical or idealist thought and the materialist or empiricist scientific view that eventually supplanted it. Kant of course cited Copernicus’s heliocentric theory as an analogy to his argument that our experience of material objects is constructed by categories in the mind (De Schutter 142), and it is in this dualist vein that Banville’s historical fiction re-situates Copernicus and Kepler. Baroque mannerism is a key reference point for Banville’s later fiction (Tournay 2001), central to his ironic—and sometimes affirmative—treatment of the ideals of perspective painting and the process of representation. This also operates in the service of thematising the distinction between the material and the intelligible and is also often the medium for a combination of sexual, narrative and philosophical “speculation.” The questionable ontology of the character A. in the novel *Athena*, or of the shipwrecked visitors to the island in *Ghosts*, are good examples of this.

Linking both these threads, to greater or lesser degree, is Banville’s ubiquitous use of Faustian allegory<sup>17</sup> through which he focuses upon an ideal of self-development and a search

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<sup>17</sup> Goethe’s *Faust*, which engages directly with the (objective and subjective) forces of modernity, is Banville’s main source, though other versions of the Faust story may be relevant.



for knowledge and power that seems misplaced in late twentieth century culture. The project of knowing and dominating nature, and the politics of totality associated with the age of the 'Enlightened Despot' (Harris 3-7) are dramatised and shown to be unethical and misguided; yet there is, on an aesthetic level at least, a nostalgia for the possible worlds they offer. If the counter-memorial is a response to the totality of historical closure, it functions because it inverts the usual form of reliable collective history and therefore depends upon our continued recognition of that form. In the same way, the disavowal of authority—in all senses of that word—that Banville's fiction enacts depends in some sense in a remaining desire for the totality of Faust's vision. As McMinin points out, placing Banville in the context of postmodernism is complicated by "the deep sense of critical sympathy in Banville for those, like Copernicus and Kepler, who dreamed of metanarratives and unifying visions" (1999:7). This is the reason elements of the Faust myth appear so regularly, particularly in the earlier novels; for, as Marshall Berman has shown, Faust's desire for development is as much a transformation of subjectivity into its modern form, as it is a transformation of the social and economic world (37-86).

Banville's novels explore this specifically modern subjectivity from the perspective of late 20th century men who cannot help looking back to Enlightenment ideals from which modernity is now so distanced. Instead of viewing the disavowal of a symbolically triumphant model of masculine subjectivity—instantiated repeatedly in Banville's texts through the ironic destabilisation of the desire for a self-grounding, transparent sense of self—simply as a lament for the uncertain conditions of modern epistemology (Imhof 1989), or as a step towards a post-modern identity (Jackson 1997), I want to consider it as an enabling condition for an expanded, self-contradictory masculine subjectivity. The logic of the sublime governs the representation of materiality in this respect as well as it is originally a product of theorizing the two kinds of subjective experience under discussion here; the theories of Burke and Kant argue for empiricism and "formal idealism" (Ferguson 1992) respectively as the significant reality demonstrated through the operation of the sublime. Rather than reading Banville's fiction as trying to choose

between postmodern relativism or conservative formalism I argue that the sublime suspends these opposing impulses and constitutes an aesthetic space in which the representation of materiality is—like the counter-memorial attitude to history and the tropes of masochism—a vehicle for the articulation of masculinity.

To enlarge upon materiality as a key element of Banville's construction of gender difference we need to turn first to the recent critical writing specifically on gender in Banville's fiction. As noted in the Introduction, Ruth Frehner wrote the first article specifically addressing this issue, in which she argued that women are "always mediated through the mind of a male protagonist, a narrator, and, more than anything else, they reflect his desires and fears" (51). Frehner identifies specific types of female character, variations of which we find throughout Banville's work, but especially in the period covering *The Newton Letter*, *Mefisto*, and *The Book of Evidence*: "Either they are sensual, plump, unlovely, awkward, blonde and fairly simple-minded, offering themselves to the narrator; or they are slender pale, dark-haired, unfathomable, elusive and therefore desirable" (ibid.). These types are linked to philosophical categories through which "the female body provides the space for man's movements, his discoveries" (56). In fact, Frehner's pairing of Ottilie and Charlotte in *The Newton Letter* is explicitly dualistic: Frehner likens Ottilie's body to the "world of the ordinary" (56), and quotes the text to show that Charlotte appears as an idea or a kind of Platonic form that can never be reached through language: "Every mention of her I make is a failure . . . Her physical presence seemed overdone, a clumsy representation of the essential she" (Banville, qtd. in Frehner 57). Frehner also speaks to this dualism when she identifies the female characters of Banville's fiction as types—"the familiar opposing poles of saintly woman and whore" (57).

Patricia Coughlan resolves the repeated pairings Frehner observed into a more extensive analysis of the "pervasive erotic and triadic scenes and patterns" (85) Banville creates in order to dramatise the mutually exclusive opposition between an ideal, romanticised femininity and a threatening femininity associated with the body, reproduction and loss of masculine

self-control. She shows how the triads (usually the male narrator and two female characters) structure the protagonists' efforts to control heterosexual desire, and notes the ambivalent power structure they create. In *The Book of Evidence*, for instance, Coughlan suggests "that Banville engineers a plot which allows Freddie to feel himself victimized even while availing of the stereotypical pornographic thrill of having sex with two women" (99, n22). Coughlan also links this power structure to philosophical categories, especially where binary oppositions manifest a desire for totality, by suggesting that "with regard to gender the framework of world-understanding, together with all the philosophical predicates of these characters, is irredeemably binarist, polarized" (84). This binarism is often literalised in the way bodies are presented (as in the case of Otilie and Charlotte in *The Newton Letter*, mentioned above). By correlating these patterns with the logic of the sublime, this thesis will show that this structure orders gender in such a way that an ideal potential—a sublime masculine subject—is privileged.

Coughlan's comments on the S/M theme of *Athena* also address questions of power and the kinds of desire Banville depicts in his fiction: "On the one hand he [Freddie, the narrator] is the plaything and slave of A's will, executing at command the array of paraphilic tasks, fetishist, voyeuristic, and pain-inflicting, which she details him to carry out; on the other he has to perform as the dominating male to whom she extravagantly submits" (92). While Coughlan appears to subscribe to the either/or logic of 'reversible' Freudian sado-masochism, her argument could just as easily serve the model of 'positive desire' that Deleuze insists is masochistic. Moreover, she recognises that Freddie "has to perform," and connects this imperative to Judith Butler's notion of gender as a performative practice. Coughlan suggests that A. is "postmodernly *citing*, rather than undergoing, the array of practices she sets up, fantasy self-degradations, all arresting surface and no depth" (92; original emphasis). Freddie is doing much the same thing, as I will discuss in Chapter Five. This overt presentation of constructed gender identities adds an important dimension to the recurrent problem of the

difficulty of discerning ethical realism from aesthetic antirealism—which is also a question of distinguishing material experience from imagination or fantasy—in these texts. It is an insoluble ‘problem’, of course, but one that is significant because of the fact that Banville’s fiction so frequently poses it. The fundamental tension between experience as a material or somatic reality and experience as an intellectual or mental reality is clearly linked to the themes of power and sexuality Coughlan identifies in *Athena*, but is no less relevant, despite being less explicit, throughout Banville’s fiction.

Anja Müller’s study of the Frames Trilogy (*The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, *Athena*) has the strongest affinities with the reading of masculinity this thesis develops. Her major concern is the way “various aesthetic programs” are fictionalised, so she asks “how the three novels re(-)present representational strategies, aesthetic positions towards representation, or ideological positions that govern both perception and representation” (186); the masculine sublime I describe is one such ideological and aesthetic position. Müller is more keenly aware than many earlier critics of the potential critique of aesthetic perception that the Frames trilogy offers. She is conscious that the nomination of an “immediate” or “natural” perception often signals the very opposite.

Müller’s main focus is the representation of women through the genre of ekphrasis. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Müller argues that on three levels—character, narrative and plot—“ekphrasis can be said to operate as a multi-layered discursive matrix for the materialisation of the female body . . . because [it] establish[es] a kind of grid, or frame, within which female bodies are discursively constructed in order to be endowed with some kind of presence” (187). I propose to extend this argument in two ways. Firstly, the concept of a grid or frame of materialisation is not limited to instances of ekphrasis, or encounters with paintings. The production or delimitation of a space in which the philosophical quality of presence—that metaphysical notion of full presence targeted by deconstruction—can appear is a consistent thread throughout Banville’s writings. Materialisation, or presence, is associated

with the aesthetic – and this is of course a problematic, even a contradictory association, since the aesthetic is usually conceived of as a synthesis of physical and mental experience. The formalist aesthetic Banville elaborates in his fiction is premised upon certain assumptions about the gender of materiality itself. That is to say, the cultural and historical notions about the re-presentation of materiality in texts are bound up with notions of gender. Therefore, the impossible materialisations that Banville's texts are so often preoccupied with are often the clearest articulations of a gender politics in his work.

Secondly, Müller suggests that “the problem at stake in the trilogy is why such a materialization ultimately remains unsuccessful, and whether it is precisely the ekphrastic strategy, employed to create presence, that eventually accounts for this Pygmalion's failure” (188). The consequences of arguing that this question relates to what I have called a ‘masculine sublime’ are twofold. First, it redirects Müller's question from the notion that Banville's writing centers on a failed teleological project towards reading such failure as productive and as the key to sustaining the kind of subjectivity inscribed by the sublime. With regard to the trilogy and Banville's other novels alike, I will argue that this sublime is attractive precisely because it is unrealisable. Through an ekphrastic sublime, where failure is inevitable, a recuperation of power is achieved and a deferral or suspension is enacted that is definitive of Banville's politics of masculine self representation. Secondly, it recognises that it is not simply the inadequacy of literary forms or techniques that is dramatized through the question of materiality or phenomenality, but rather that these forms are particularised in the kind of male intellectual characters at the centre of Banville's fiction. While ekphrasis, for instance, may typically dramatise experiences of loss or dislocation—such as death, absence, and temporality—it is subsumed by a more general pattern in Banville's texts, namely desire structured by the logic of the sublime.

To expand on Müller's discussion of the aesthetic programme underlying the production of materiality as an effect of reading, we must now look more closely at its theoretical basis. Judith Butler's analysis of the form/matter debate in *Bodies that Matter: On the Dis-*

*cursive Limits of 'Sex'* connects the poststructuralist subject with the gendered history of the philosophical concept of materiality. In the first chapter she considers Luce Irigaray's well known argument that binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine and form/matter, are constituted within a masculine signifying economy, and function to exclude the feminine from representation altogether. Irigaray's "Plato's *Hystera*," for instance, reads Plato's allegory of the cave as an appropriative or imperialistic transition in the history of ideas, in which the binary sensible/intelligible is carefully separated into genders and transformed by a narrative which discounts and closes off the former as an illusory theatre of deceitful representations.

According to Irigaray, there are two scenes in Plato's story; the first is a reflective, phantasmatic womb-cave where copies of copies proliferate and representation is a deceptive shadow-theatrics, a stage of reproductions, while the second is a daylight world of sameness where the truth and light of the solar father guarantees that images adhere to a singular ideality, where images and forms are "standardized against *one* face, *one* presence, *one* measure: that of Truth" (Irigaray 1985:292; original emphasis), and where "[d]ifference and deferral are gradually banished . . . they still remain but within a *reduplication*, that is more and more instantaneous, instantly masterable and mastered. More and more clear, luminous, evident" (289; original emphasis).<sup>18</sup> Irigaray argues that by figuring the maternal cave, or "den of reflections" as inferior to the solar scene, Plato's claims for the pre-eminence of the eternal forms over empirical evidence also founds a masculinist politics that pre-empts generative phantasy or projection at the maternal site with an always already existing abstract truth.

For Irigaray, the allegory of the cave describes how the feminine is excluded from philosophical discourse. The dialectical structure founded in Plato's story constitutes an ideological form that erases the reality of female sociality and sexuality or pushes it to the margins as a falsehood, and replaces it with a phallogocentric notion of the feminine that is nothing but a re-

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<sup>18</sup> Irigaray's insistence upon the etymology linking evidence and truth with vision (*videre*) is an important reminder of the gender dimension in Banville's *The Book of Evidence*.

flection of the regulatory sameness of male desire and meaning. For Irigaray, this signification authorised by sameness excludes the feminine and maternal from the production of meaning, so that it remains outside the system of signification devoted to the True. In the essay “Une mère de Glace,” another commentary on the Platonic conceptualisation of matter, Irigaray discusses the notion of the “receptacle,” that which Plato calls, in the cosmographical theory outlined in the *Timaeus*, the “nurse of all becoming and change” (Plato 66). Plato posits the existence of the receptacle to explain how the eternal Forms take on material existence. It is a ‘third term,’ likened to space, and added to the eternal Forms and the world of appearances or “copies,” that acts as the inert medium in which form can be effected. Irigaray concludes that in the philosophical tradition stemming from Plato, “Matter is sterile, not female to full effect, female in receptivity only, not in pregnancy” (Irigaray 1985:179). It is infinitely receptive and changeable but never receives any share of being, nor can it interact or effect change upon the forms which enter it.

It is in relation to these arguments regarding a gendered concept of materiality set against philosophical truth that Judith Butler takes up Irigaray’s work. Butler, however, rejects “the notion that the feminine monopolizes the sphere of the excluded” (Butler 1993:48). She argues that otherness in “Plato’s scenography of intelligibility” (ibid.) is constructed not only on the basis of gender but through other subordinations of “inferior” bodies to the ‘body of reason.’ This body of reason is in fact

one whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies. This is a materialization of reason which operates through the dematerialization of other bodies, for the feminine, strictly speaking, has no morphe, no morphology, no contour, for it is that which contributes to the contouring of things, but is itself undifferentiated, without boundary. The body that is reason dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason or its replicas, and yet this is a figure in crisis, for this body of reason is itself the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity, one which

requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it will not perform. (48-9)

For Butler, the masculine subject of reason disavows one kind of body and invents another, an imagined ideal “body” of rationality. Yet, in the Platonic tradition, as in Enlightenment aesthetic discourse, the notion of a ‘rational body’ remains contradictory and unstable, since the body is the site of sensations and emotions that cannot be satisfactorily domesticated by theory. From the perspective of this thesis, the “figure in crisis, a figure that enacts a crisis it cannot fully control” can be understood as a performance of the masochistic subject as Mansfield defines it. Indeed, Butler’s account of the equivocal role of “matter” in relation to the masculine subject of reason (disavowed, yet always returning; providing an exemplary body that is nonetheless threatened just as it is threatening) allows for the emergence of a state of “masochistic indifference,” in which the hierarchical terms revealed as structuring gender are re-established in terms of a “crisis” – a figure which suspends the difference between matter and non-matter, and which confuses the two in its operation. The oppositions of this dynamic, such as form/matter, shape/shapelessness, active/passive and so on, are thereby destabilised and aestheticised, and transformed one into the other. In Mansfield’s account this never happens in order to mobilise the terms dialectically but in order to reproduce them in contradictory yet persisting terms.

It follows from Butler’s adoption of Foucault’s concept of power that even a subject in crisis may be constituted through power, or can exemplify the workings of power, rather than being a prior agent acted upon by an external power. This crisis of the masculine body of reason can be understood in Mansfield’s terms, as a masochistic form of subjectivity, and we can suppose that Butler would agree that even a state of “crisis,” or the loss or removal of power, originating from the centre of patriarchal discourse—of which the sublime is my central example—may be an effect of power. As such, this thesis contends that the masculine subject performed or produced through a kind of insecurity about “mattering” is another facet



of the masculine sublime that operates in Banville's fiction. The attraction to the masculine subject in crisis is of the utmost importance for understanding the power relations involved in his texts, especially in terms of the discursive construction of materiality and the gender politics shaped by these relations.

The exclusion that Butler argues is at work in this dematerialising image of the masculine subject works in two ways. The feminine is often presented as without form or structure, as in Plato's account, but is also a "stand in" for an idealised 'body of reason' – that is, as an ideal form. It is important to recognise, however, that these patterns are founded on the male narrator who with one hand stakes a claim to an ideal body or material arrangement while disowning this materiality with the other. The masculine subject of Banville's fiction relies upon a construction of the Other that links gender to embodiment or materiality in the process of strategically reproducing the idealism at the core of what Mansfield describes as a masochistic sublime. In some cases, this construction of the Other, the not-Self, is usefully compared to psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, outlined in *Powers of Horror* (1982). Closely attuned to what Kristeva calls the semiotic, a state not fully assimilated by the symbolic during the entrance into language and subjectivity, the abject describes a kind of reflexive disgust, a sense of revulsion at infecting or damaging the body, and thus defines what is outside, what must be controlled and excluded by the symbolic order for the subject to exist. Like the sublime, abjection describes both the experience of excess, of the outside of the subject, and redefines or conserves the limit of the subject. Dirk de Schutter has noted the importance of abjection in *Doctor Copernicus*, linking it to the breakdown of institutions and the struggles within and between church and state as well as with torture and destruction of the body (149). De Schutter also shows that abject materiality is not confined to female characters, since it is Andreas, Nicholas's brother, who fulfils this role in the novel. I will discuss abjection in relation to such disfigurement in Chapter Four.

This anxiety about the meaning and "control" of materiality is central to masculinity in

Banville's fiction. *Birchwood* begins with Descartes' famous *cogito* in reverse ("I am, therefore I think" (11)), seemingly announcing the demise of the prioritisation of thought over material existence. The incompatibility of intellectual inspiration and material embodiment is definitive of his historiographic novels *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, where the empirical seems to oppose the elaboration of an ideal cosmic order. Likewise, the emergence of visual art as a primary theme from *The Book of Evidence* onwards occurs within narrations of the problematic representation of femininity or the (feminine) object that reason cannot master. The narrator of *The Newton Letter*, upon discovering that his interpretation of the characters and relationships in the Lawless family is misguided, likens himself to one who is "dazzled": "I was like a man living underground who, coming up for air, is dazzled by the light and cannot find his way back into his bolt-hole. I trudge back and forth over the familiar ground, muttering. I am lost" (NL 95). This is a useful example of the way in which Banville's fiction frames masculinity. The Newton biographer here is likened to a prisoner stumbling out of the Platonic cave, and to Dostoyevsky's portrait of unceasing self-criticism in *Notes from the Underground*. A lost one, Banville's narrators nonetheless revel in being lost, and thereby represent a masculinist bias within western metaphysics, as outlined in Irigaray's reading of Plato's allegory of the cave. Thus, the maintenance of the dialectic between true and false, or between primary and secondary representations, can reinforce patriarchal values even when it becomes confused and fragmented:

How bitter it is to be incarcerated in an enclosure when nothing is known of what lies behind it—outside: other—sustaining a longing to return there but with no knowledge of the road to take. The passage between is forgotten. Every misconception is thus made possible, every misconstruction. Pleasure and pain multiply. (Irigaray 1985:350-1)

What exactly might it mean for masculine reason to be "crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies"? An initial example should help establish the centrality of such exclusion in

Banville's fiction. In *The Book of Evidence*, Banville seems to suggest that Josie Bell is killed because narrator Freddie Montgomery "did not imagine her sufficiently." At the same time Freddie imaginatively over-invests in the woman represented in the painting he steals, inventing a material life and context for her where none is known to exist. Thus *The Book of Evidence* tells the story of how the maid's physical presence is excluded, or discounted. The well known passages that describe Freddie's awareness of Josie as he kills her focus on—even fetishise—her physical presence, a "raw force" that fills him with a "kind of wonder" (113). He describes how he registered her "mousy hair and bad skin, that bruised look around her eyes" (ibid.), but was still able to kill her. The ordinary existence of Josie is shown to be something that does not *matter* to Freddie – both in the usual sense and insofar as her physical body is presented as somehow less real than an image of a body. By contrast, the painted woman, despite being literally two-dimensional, is fully imagined even to the extent that the painter's gaze gives her a sense of identity and purpose. She is made to matter too much, and thus to wield an illusory power over Freddie.

Like *The Book of Evidence*, Banville's other texts also explore the contrast between ordinary material realities and the formal patterns that shape an artistic reality. The distinction, which is often blurry, is nevertheless central to his aesthetic practice, and draws on metaphysical categories associated with philosophical traditions that have been critiqued as 'phallogocentric.' In other words, they are ideologically linked to a belief—perhaps implicit or even unconscious—in a metaphysical reality that can be accessed through language, and tend to privilege patriarchal power structures as part of the form this reality takes. As well as dealing with the sublime as a mode or structure within masculine subjectivities, the following chapters of this thesis address the historical (and confessional) dimension of Banville's writing alongside this concern with the material/immaterial distinction. If the threads of the argument overlap one another at times, it is because the ideas and effects associated with them are interrelated in the texts. Banville's portrayal of masculinity is integrated with both the kind of representation

given to the historical—or counter-memorial—perspective on the past and with the construction of ‘reality effects’ within the representation of a material scene, object or experience. The ‘masculine sublime’ is the central structure around which these representational strategies are organised, and it is from this basis that the following chapters address salient aspects of the topic with detailed reference to several of Banville’s most important texts.

## Chapter 2

# **“An inspired sickness”: the Masochistic Subject in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler***

*What he was after was the deeper, the deepest thing: the kernel, the essence, the true.*<sup>1</sup>

In the Western imagination Copernicus is a mover of worlds, both cosmic and cultural. His name is now virtually synonymous with scientific and cultural revolution, and has a history of usage by major thinkers, such as Kant and Freud, to describe paradigm shifts that have helped shape the modern world. Johannes Kepler, though a less familiar name than Copernicus, was likely even more important in the development of theoretical astronomy, and holds a similarly revered place in the history of science. In *Doctor Copernicus: A Novel* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981), Banville presents the lives and ideas of these intellectual heroes, finding lasting currency in their efforts to establish some of the scientific foundations of modernity. Yet there has been

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<sup>1</sup> *Doctor Copernicus*, 79.

little analysis of the role of subjectivity in these novels – a topic almost inevitably implicated by the subsequent revolutions with which Copernicus's name has been associated (modern philosophy, psychoanalysis), not to mention the fact that the novel form itself demands such attention because of its intrinsic interest in the inner life of individuals. This chapter will, in examining these two ostensibly 'historical' novels, show that Banville is also concerned with a particular form of masculine subjectivity that is contemporary in nature.

Banville's critics have engaged with the continuity that his most clearly 'historical' works suggest between early modern and contemporary ideas about representation and epistemology; but they tend not to ask questions about the subject that experiences these epistemological crises. The influence of Rudiger Imhof's assertion that "[t]he importance of the novel does not rest on the psychogramme it presents with enviable ingenuity of Canon Kopernigk as a recluse and sourpuss, but on the epistemological idea expressed through . . . the process of disillusionment that he undergoes" (1981:70) has been too great. Imhof's exclusive discussion of the "novel of ideas" has meant that the subject of knowledge which is presented as having those ideas has largely been ignored. Similarly, M. Keith Booker notes that in writing historically-based fiction, Banville seeks to "depict his protagonists as real human beings," rather than imitate the models of perfection and awe he found in Yourcenar's *The Abyss* or Brod's *The Redemption of Tycho Brae* (184); nonetheless, Booker has followed Imhof's lead to argue that "*Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* are to a large extent not the stories of individuals so much as the stories of ideas, accounts of important developments in the history of Western thought" (184). Yet these epistemological issues cannot be independent of subjectivity. While these novels present sketches of important historical thinkers and their ideas, in each case the "process of disillusionment" Banville depicts focuses them on the way in which masculine subjectivity is defined through a certain kind of intellectual 'failure.'

A close reading of the subject in these novels inverts the function of a key theme; namely, the issue of the impossibility of absolute referentiality. Joseph McMinin suggests that

“[t]he reason for Copernicus’s failure and confusion lies with his denial of the inexpressible nature of mysteries beyond systems” (McMinn 1999:51). McMinn argues that Copernicus fails to accept this on faith, whereas Andreas and Rheticus do accept it, following the assertion that “[o]nly by submitting to the limits of knowledge, paradoxically, can any understanding of the world be attained” (McMinn 60). This, I will argue, obscures a more interesting proposition: that Banville’s narrative constructs subjectivity by means of this very submission to an inexpressible nature or the impossible object. If Banville is, as McMinn suggests, the author of a “‘postmodernist’ fiction” (58), it is because of the epistemological concerns that the novel raises in combination with the metafictional formal and narrative techniques used.<sup>2</sup> But while the similarity between Copernicus’s crisis of referentiality and the rise of poststructuralist thinking is undeniable, the implications for the status of the subject in Banville’s work are less clear. Similarly, it is important to consider Kepler’s attraction to the process of abandoning his revelations in order to find new ones. Do Banville’s scientists really accept their crisis of referentiality and the limits of knowledge, and take on a postmodern cultural identity by ending in “redemptive despair”? I suggest that these crises are central to Banville’s understanding of masculine subjectivity. Both Copernicus and Kepler are invested in a notion of transcendent rationality, a “harmony in nature and the universe, that always remains out of their reach. Under this condition, the constitution of subjectivity is determined in terms of the sublime relation to the “eternal truths, the pure forms that lie behind the chaos of the world” (*DC* 238), which are always beyond their powers of thought or representation.

It is through this articulation of a limit to the knowable, and unlimited possibilities beyond it, that the masochistic masculine subject position asserts itself in these historical fictions. In both novels, the opposition between abstract thought and life as pleasurable and painful fields of experience respectively provides material for a masculinity that uses its op-

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<sup>2</sup> For an outline of ‘epistemological postmodernism’, and its distinction from other strands of postmodern thought, especially in relation to literature, see Elias xx-xxvii.

pression in one area to activate its freedom in another. In *Doctor Copernicus*, Nicholas Copernicus's repression (or simply his meekness) in personal and social matters is, at least partially, presented as a cause of his intellectual intensity and creativity. In *Kepler*, the pressures of religious persecution and family life operate in a similar fashion – as stimulants to Johannes Kepler's work on astronomical theory. That masculinity should be articulated as the product of a heroic struggle taking place beyond the social or family scene is hardly a groundbreaking observation. Yet the particular emphasis on intellectual failure and the necessity of discarding theories and starting anew gives these novels a “masochistic” character. The persistent aesthetic and epistemological concerns with confronting and straining against the limits of what can be presented by the imagination or expressed in language make Banville's scientists exemplary of a sublime, masochistic subjectivity.

In the first part of this chapter, I will survey several key representations of the masculine in *Doctor Copernicus*, by considering Copernicus's life and various relationships more or less chronologically. The notion of the “unpresentable” is developed at the intersection of language, gender and aesthetics. Specifically, I will show how Copernicus is a masochistic subject, who, although he displays some of the trappings of masochistic practice familiar to readers of Sacher-Masoch and other similar writers, should be understood as masochistic primarily because of the way in which he is inscribed within a particular dynamic of power. The protagonist of *Kepler* is portrayed more sympathetically and realistically than Copernicus, yet here too Banville collocates Kepler's apprehension of a cosmic order with an experience of powerlessness or disorder in his social and religious life. Furthermore, I discuss how *Kepler* displays a fascination with the sublime through the repeated breaking or dissolving of meticulously ordered formal structures.



## 2.1 Doctor Copernicus

*Faust: What a sea of confusion and error we live in, finding no use for the knowledge we have and lacking the very knowledge we need. There is solace in the mere thought of escape . . . The body has not wings to match the spirit's wings. Yet it is natural for our feelings to soar upward and onward [...]*<sup>3</sup>

*Doctor Copernicus* emphasises the unavoidably aporetic conclusion of its protagonist's search for astronomical truth from the outset. The novel begins by alluding to Joyce's technique in the early pages of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in which the acquisition of language is formally dramatised and an unfamiliar external reality is tamed by the slowly developing naturalisation of the relation between words and things in the protagonist's consciousness. It opens with Nicholas's growing awareness of the world and the process of naming objects: "At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing" (3). As in *Birchwood*, the phrase "the thing itself" suggests the Kantian noumenon – a notion of the object as it exists independently of its apprehension by the senses.<sup>4</sup> This anachronistic reference indicates Copernicus's epistemological concerns before he is even capable of naming, as it associates him with Kant's two-tiered critical philosophy which attempted to reconcile sensory, empirical truths with transcendental ideal truths. The role of this philosophical distinction in the novel is to provide a "gap" which demands to be bridged.

Banville uses the divisions between the sensible and the ideal—and, in a more contemporary superimposition, between the signifier and referent—to propagate a subject perpetually articulated through contradiction and impossibility. The most prophetic moment in

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<sup>3</sup> J.W. von Goethe. *Faust: Part I*. (London: David Cambell, 1999). 775.

<sup>4</sup> The thing-in-itself is "Kant's expression for the object considered as it is independently of its cognitive relation to the human mind. It is contrasted with the object as it appears, or phenomenon, which is the object *qua* given to the mind in accordance with its sensible forms. Although Kant denies that we can know the thing-in-itself, he maintains that we must think of it as the ground of appearance." See Henry Allison. *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Ed. Ted Honderich. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). 871.

Nicholas's education is Canon Wodka's expression of a powerful disjunction: "all theories are but names, *but the world itself is a thing*" . . . it was as if a sibyl had spoken" (23; original emphasis). Years later, in his debate with Professor Brudzewski, Nicholas opposes the professor's traditional views, consistent with Ptolemy and scholastic realism, with the empirical and thoroughly modern suggestion that "Knowledge, *magister*, must become perception. The only acceptable theory is that one which *explains* the phenomena" (36; original emphasis). The Professor accuses him of holding a nominalist position, which, interestingly, is not incompatible with a poststructuralist or postmodern view of signification as having an indeterminate and productive—rather than determined and representative—relation to objects. What is often described as an aporia between words and things comes to the fore here, and is associated with suffering some pages later:

He crouched at his desk by the light of a guttering candle, and suffered: it was a kind of slow internal bleeding . . . There seemed to be lacking some essential connection. The universe of dancing planets was out there, and he was here, and between the two spheres mere words and figures on paper could not mediate. Someone had once said something similar: who was that, or when? What matter! He dipped his pen in ink. He bled. (93)

Like the distinction made by Canon Wodka, this writing does not truly mediate between words (or ideas) and things, but rather perpetuates the disjunction and the idealised, static suffering that, for Nicholas, goes along with it. The similarity between contemporary and Renaissance debates about the referentiality of names serves only to suggest that the problem of knowledge repeats itself – that what McMinn referred to as Nicholas's "failure" is a kind of historical (and/or linguistic) inevitability.

The dilemmas Nicholas faces are important not only in terms of epistemology, but for their role in ordering a particular structure of subjectivity. This structure—which I have called masochistic—is suggested early in the novel by Nicholas's response to his mother's death. Los-

ing his mother is a serious shock to Nicholas, perhaps in part because she was associated with an absolute presence evoked in speech: “When he stumbled on the hard words she bore him up gently, in a wonderfully gentle voice” (4). Her dead body

was utterly, uniquely still, and seemed in this unique utter stillness to have arrived at last at a true and total definition of what she was, herself, her vivid self itself. Everything around her, even the living creatures coming and going, appeared vague and unfinished compared with her stark thereness. And yet she was dead, she was no longer his mother, who was in Heaven, so they told him. But if that was so, then what was this thing that remained? (5-6)

The intensity of repetition and concentration on the image of the mother’s body as absolute and ontologically distinct from other things suggests that for Nicholas death brings a connection with noumenal ‘reality.’ By reversing the opposition of being and non-being, Nicholas appears to find security against one absolute (death) by confusing it with absolute permanence in the form of this ineffable “thing-in-itself.” Nicholas’s formation as a subject seems to be initiated here, in his effort to retain some control over a world that has now lost absolute maternal love. The “total definition” the narrator attributes to his dead mother indicates the possible transformation of this loss into an ideal stasis that might displace the threatening materiality of “this thing that remained.”

We see how Nicholas seeks control over a frightening and unpredictable world in his early days at school as he learns about mathematics and tries to avoid social conflicts. Nicholas’s impressions of his teacher, the knowing and dangerous Canon Sturm, leads to a dream-scenario where Nicholas’s sexuality is articulated through the power relations between master and animal. The elements of this dream are ordered by the ambivalence or “indifference” that Mansfield argues is central to masochistic identity. The images of aetherial harmony and upward progress that have, at this point, already begun to link Nicholas’s personal interests and pe-

cularities with his significant historical position in the unfolding epistemological revolution of modernity, now become malevolent. The sequence in which metallic dream-hawks attack Nicholas suggests that he desires the kind of mastery displayed when Sturm practises his falconry. Instead of direct identification with this “brutal” masculine role model, Nicholas sees himself as a victim and the hawks as representing a terrifying otherness that dominates him. Nonetheless, this domination gives him pleasure. Such a possibility—central to the operation of masochistic subjectivity—characterises the forces that motivate Nicholas:

The hawks, *terrible and lovely*, filled the sunny air with the clamour of tiny deaths. Nicholas looked on in *a mixture of horror and elation*. Such *icy rage*, such intentness *frightened him*, yet it thrilled him too . . . Compared with their vivid presence all else was vague and insubstantial. They were absolutes. Only Canon Sturm could match their bleak ferocity. At rest they stood as still as stone and watched him with a fixed tormented gaze; even in flight their haste and brutal economy seemed bent to one end only, to return with all possible speed to that wrist, those silken jesses, those eyes. And their master, *object of such terror and love*, grew leaner, harder, darker, became something other than he was. Nicholas watched him watching his creatures and was stirred, obscurely, shamefully. “Up sir! Up!” A heron shrieked and fell out of the air. “Up!” Monstrous hawklike creatures were flying on invisible struts and wires across a livid sky, and there was a great tumult far off, screams and roars, and *howls of agony or of laughter*, that came to him from that immense distance as a faint terrible twittering. Even when he woke and lay terror-stricken in a stew of sweat the dream would not end. It was as if he had tumbled headlong into some beastly black region of the firmament. He pulled at that blindly rearing lever between his legs, pulled at it and pulled, pulling himself back into the world. Dimly he sensed someone near him, a dark figure in the darkness, but he could not care, it was too late to stop, and he shut his eyes tight. The hawks bore down on him, he could see their great black gleaming wings, their withered claws and metallic talons, their cruel beaks

agape and *shrieking without sound*, and under that awful onslaught his self shrank together into a tiny throbbing point. For an instant everything stopped, and all was poised on the edge of darkness and *a kind of exquisite dying*, and then he arched his back like a bow and spattered the sheets with his seed. (23-24; emphasis added)

The passage shows how Nicholas's thirst for knowledge and power becomes sexualised and linked to contradictory emotional states. The birds that produce these states represent "absolutes," which he cannot challenge, and against which sexual pleasure is his only means of "pulling himself back into the world." The attraction to the bird's "master," who seems to blend into the figure of Andreas, suggests that for Nicholas knowledge is a matter of power, of dominating the outside world of objects by reason or by a fierce control over nature such as Canon Sturm's. But for Nicholas such power is confounded or suspended, and, as the contradictions highlighted above show, it cannot be clearly felt as either pleasure or as pain. In the passage pleasure increases as the self diminishes, and while this "exquisite dying" plays on the archaic terminology for orgasm, it also shows the masochistic imprint. Pain authorises pleasure, not by a transformation of one into the other, as the Freudian account of masochism describes, but because their structural opposition provides the subject with an opportunity to imagine the other in a way which guarantees his own satisfaction. The sublime tension developed in this passage culminates in the presentation of an unlimitedness, a void associated with the dissolution the self, where, nonetheless, a controlled and ordered desire is fulfilled. The scene also combines aesthetic elements familiar from Burke and Kant as markers of the sublime, such as obscurity, natural fierceness or might, and visual mastery.

Directly following this erotic dream, the narrator informs us that Nicholas does not have ordinary desires of the flesh. Instead, the dream has left an overt formulation of sublimity. Nicholas strains against embodiment and enclosure beneath a surface; he became "an insubstantial thing, a web of air rippling in red winds. He felt that he had been flayed of a vital protective skin. His surfaces ached, flesh, nails, hair, the very filaments of his eyes, *yearning*

*for what he could not name nor even properly imagine*” (24; emphasis added). Even more fully than in the erotic dream, this image presents Nicholas straining to comprehend or overcome a sublime limit. Let us recall Kant’s definition of the sublime:

[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power (Kant 1987:105-106; original editing).

In *Doctor Copernicus*, this “arousal” is the payoff in a masochistic equation. The contradictory relation between the faculties affirms the power of our reason to think about what we cannot yet imagine. As Andrew Bowie puts it, “[b]ecause we feel our limits we must also feel what is not limited in ourselves, otherwise we would have no way of being aware of a limit” (Bowie 37). This rejection of the senses produces a reinforcement of the power of reason that infinitely exceeds “sensible presentation.” The sublime is that realm where what restricts or punishes the subject becomes his inner power, where “what he could not name nor even properly imagine” makes the “supersensual” existence, at once subjected *to* and protected *by* the external world of pain and degradation.

Nicholas’s relations with his peers are similarly overwhelming, as we see from in his experiences of school life (Banville may be echoing the early stages of Joyce’s *Portrait* here too). Nicholas cowers from the activity of others, eventually coming to enjoy his sense of anonymity and overwhelming inadequacy:

The school was a whirling wheel of noise and violence at the still centre of which he cowered, dizzy and frightened, wondering at the poise of those swaggering fellows with their rocky knuckles and terrible teeth, who know all the rules, and never stumbled, and

ignored him so completely . . . he felt that he was living only half his life . . . and that the other, better half was elsewhere, mysteriously . . . So he waited, and endured as patiently as he could the mean years, believing that someday his sundered selves must meet in some far finer place, of which at moments he was afforded intimations, in green April weather, in the enormous wreckage of clouds, or in the aetherial splendours of High Mass. (16-17)

In terms of masculinity, Nicholas's main difference from the "swaggering fellows" is not just physical, but social and aesthetic. Other boys seemed to "know all the rules" and "never stumbled." He feels that the difficulty of his intellectual and emotional life stems from an inability to comprehend and bind himself to a law which will govern his behaviour—and which appears to govern the behaviour and ensure the happiness of those macho, almost animalistic, individuals all around him. However, it is significant that Nicholas's position in this scene is at the "still centre." Surrounded by what he perceives as terrifying noise and violence, Nicholas controls his emotions by projecting into the future an aesthetic space where "his sundered selves must meet." By placing his "other, better half" in a benign future he can psychologically counter (if not truly resolve) the difficulties of the present. Foreshadowing the narrator of *Eclipse*—whose name, Cleave, suggests that he is both separating and rejoining his "divided" self at once—Nicholas divides himself between a present stationary waiting and a future resolution revealed to him in aesthetic "intimations." As Mansfield shows, waiting and yearning are the masochist's favoured roles, whereby promoting painful effects and denying pleasure creates a kind of self-control and an interiorisation of sublime futurity as the subject's power.

In this intractable position, Nicholas's desires are diverted away from socially intelligible forms towards a sublime ideal; the women he notices are "hopelessly corporeal creatures. Even the youngest and daintiest of them in no way matched the shimmering singing spirits that flew at him out of the darkness of his frantic nights" (25). Later, we are told that "Nothing that he knew on earth could match the pristine purity he imagined in the heavens" (32). Women

are associated with the body and materiality and thus lack the ideal, if terrifying forms experienced in his dreams of subjection. While his relationship with Anna Schillings later in life is important (she becomes his housekeeper, carer, and on rare occasions, his lover), Nicholas is “helpless and embarrassed” (148) when listening to her story, and although he takes her in and tries to protect her against Bishop Dantiscus, their relationship is given most attention in relation to the trouble it creates with the Church authorities.

Indeed, the place of sociality and interpersonal relationships is always inferior to aesthetic, perceptive or epistemological concerns in *Doctor Copernicus*. This can be seen in the section describing Anna’s background and meeting with Nicholas (139-146), where the narrator becomes pompous and intrusive. Imhof identifies the tone as having “a distinctly Fielding-like ring” to it, and he quotes the following authorial intrusion: “How she survived that awful period we shall not describe; we draw a veil over that subject...” (142). However, he does not see any reason to “warrant such a sudden, unexpected change into the parodic” (ibid.). What Imhof does not say is that the narrative voice changes precisely when the subject matter turns to Anna’s background and issues such as marriage and family. Banville’s parody of mundane social dramas and their presentation in novelistic form implies that, relative to the intellectual pursuits of his male hero, women’s social positions and aspirations are trivial and absurd. Many of the narrator’s comments in the section support this view: “Not for Frau Schillings the tears and tantrums with which troubles are most commonly greeted by the weaker sex” (140); or the judgement that “although she was spirited, she *was* also a woman” (141). The narration and dialogue are also laden with false affectiveness and paltry humour, as in the following example:

“Wait,” said Hermina, patting the hands that still lay like weary turtle doves in her own, “dear Anna, wait: I think I know what you are about to say.”

“Do you, Hermina, do you?”

“Yes, my poor child, I know. Let me spare you, therefore; let *me* say it: you want a loan.” (144)



While these narrative effects prepare for Rheticus's first person perspective in the third section of the novel, they also function as a way of persuading the reader of the value of Nicholas's cold and detached manner in contrast to the "trifling" dramas of the nuclear family. Indeed, this absurd and frivolous material is introduced immediately after we see "Provost Koppernigk . . . recording in his ledger, in his small precise hand, the names of the dead . . . He was cold; he had never known such cold" (139). Through the contrast, Nicholas's "anaesthesia,"—his disconnection from social and family concerns and his cold, sublime aestheticism—are made to seem more serious and legitimate.

We might compare this parodic section with appearances of other women in the novel. For instance, unlike Anna, the daughter of Professor Brudzewski referred to as the "green girl" is glimpsed for a mere moment, yet she warrants significant a degree of emphasis. Arriving at the professor's house, Nicholas sees "a smiling girl in a green gown going out by another [door], leaving behind her trembling on the bright air an image of blurred beauty" (31). She is, according to the professor, mad. Yet she is an emblem of Nicholas's ideal: a blurred, indistinct figure pointing towards a supersensible reality. This "green girl"—symbolic, through an allusion to the final stanza of Wallace Stevens's *Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction*, of the world conceived as a rational whole—has a counterpart in the episode where Nicholas, in his capacity as a healer of the sick, meets a sexually diseased young girl in a "green gown," named Alicia. The narrator records that "she seemed turned inward somehow, away from the world, as if she were the carrier of a secret that made her inner self wholly sufficient, as if she were the initiate of a cult" (113). These girls function as relays between an elusive, sublime intuition and an aspiring masochistic subjectivity. They are markers of an ideal (and impossible) objectivity that is sustainable only in aesthetic terms. Femininity in this mode signals a mysteriously sinister and unattainable knowledge that escapes the masculine subject. And these terms are produced within strict gender-political parameters, as we have seen in the different treatments of Anna Schillings when compared to the "green girl" and Alicia.

Andreas, Nicholas's miscreant brother, functions as the main agency of Nicholas's subjection to social contact and inevitable embarrassment. The brothers are a clear instance of the several twins or doppelgangers common in Banville's earlier works. Andreas grows in symbolic stature as the novel progresses and is increasingly implicated in betraying and frustrating Nicholas; it is Andreas who provides the final piece of rhetoric to Brudzewski's rejection of Nicholas's arguments, and also he, the narrative implies, who relays those ideas to Novara: "There was of course one only who could have betrayed him; well, no matter. He was *both pained and pleased*, as if he had been caught in the commission of a clever crime" (49; my emphasis). By the opening of the second part, "Magister Ludi," Andreas has become a symbolic extension of his brother's fears and weaknesses. The first-person paragraphs ("Waterbourne he comes, at dead of night") that begin and end this section emphasise the immediacy of the horror that Andreas's mutilated physique represents for Nicholas. As the novel progresses, his body is transformed by syphilis from its childhood beauty to a state of grotesque disfigurement. Upon the brothers' reunion Andreas's face has become

a ghastly ultimate thing, a mud mask set with eyes . . . He was almost entirely bald above a knotted, suppurating forehead. His upper lip was all eaten away on one side, so that his mouth was set lopsidedly in what was not a grin and yet not a snarl either. One of his ears was a mess of crumbled white meat, while the other was untouched, a pinkish shell that in its startling perfection appeared far more hideous than its ruined twin. (100)

Banville depicts him as a half damaged alter-ego ("on one side", "one of his ears was a mess . . . the other was untouched"), emphasising the contrast between Nicholas's coldness and the physical and affective realities he cannot entirely ignore. In this scene, the narrator tells us Nicholas "felt sundered, as if mind and body had come apart" (100); he questions the reality of his brother's presence, but wonders: "had he known all along, without admitting it, the nature of his brother's illness? Suddenly his sundered halves rushed together with a sick-

ening smack” (101). Andreas provides a carefully controlled otherness which can be seen as both ‘contaminating’ Nicholas and propelling him further into his idealised world of the intellect. In other words, Andreas’s proximity to Nicholas’s own sense of self makes him a part of Nicholas that must be repressed or projected elsewhere as other to him. This perpetuates what, in a phrase that echoes Yeats’s evocation of an aestheticised stasis in “Sailing to Byzantium,” Andreas identifies as Nicholas’s state of “death-in-life” (101). This doppelganger relationship clearly suggests that Nicholas’s idealised and isolated subjectivity results from an idea of totality or transcendence which, far from being discounted by the division within the masculine subject the brothers represent, is intensified and maintained in all its ‘hideous perfection’ through the drama of Nicholas’s subjection to the reality presented by Andreas.

An important literary allusion with bearing upon the relationship between Nicholas and Andreas and the role of disease in the novel is alluded to in the title: “Doctor” Copernicus refers readers to *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann’s modernist and Faustian biographical novel about composer Adrian Leverkühn. There are strong similarities between Adrian and Nicholas. They share a cold and aloof manner, and both are indifferent to the everyday world, preferring abstract forms and ideas to people and sensations. However, the Faustian myth—involving the exchange of one’s “soul” in return for creative genius or mastery—is much more explicitly developed in Mann’s novel. There, Adrian wilfully infects himself with syphilis and later “hallucinates” a pact with the devil, selling his soul in return for “towering flights and illuminations, experiences of upliftings and unfetterings, of freedom, certainty, facility, feeling of power and triumph” (Mann 234)). Mann presents his infection as a doorway to the heights of artistic genius. In *Doctor Copernicus*, it is Andreas who is infected with syphilis, while Nicholas remains entirely isolated and cold to human contact. Nevertheless, the disease is important, for it strengthens the dualistic relation between the brothers by embodying the polar opposition of bodily wholeness and decay. By separating the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ elements of the Faustian bargain between Nicholas and Andreas, Banville maintains a separation within the conflicted

masculine subjectivity they represent, thereby intensifying the sense of absolute difference between the binary oppositions on which they are founded.

The devil that Adrian Leverkühn hallucinates identifies the historical co-origin of syphilis and religious flagellation, and suggests that “he” and Adrian are “right at home” in the year 1500—which is the time of Copernicus:

from anno MD or thereabouts . . . the right planets come together in the sign of the Scorpion, as Master Dürer has eruditely drawn in the medical broadsheet, there came the tender little ones, the swarms of animated corkscrews, the loving guests from the West Indies into the German lands, the flagellants – ah, now you listen! As though I spake of the marching guild of penitents, the Flagellants, who flailed for their own and all other sins. But I mean those flagellates, the invisible tiny ones, the kind that have scourges, like our pale Venus, the *spirochæta pallida*, that is the true sort. But th’art right, it sounds so comfortingly like the depths of Middle Ages and the *flagellum hæreticorum fascinariorum*. Yea, verily, as fascinariii they may well shew themselves, our devotees, in the better cases, as in yours. (Mann 235-36)

Adrian’s devil describes a “dark” modernity that makes syphilis its Venus, and where the ideal woman is the “little sea-maid” who brings both pain and inspiration. Like Nicholas’s encounters with the “green girl” and Alicia—the latter of whom combines a “seraphic face and that dreadful flower blossoming in secret inside her young girl’s frail thighs” (114)—the ideal feminine beauty is used to articulate a power that increases proportionately to the damage it inflicts upon itself. The difference is that while Adrian combines sickness and genius, Nicholas and Andreas divide the Faustian elements between them and therefore create a more sustained disjunction between body and mind, sense and reason, and so on. The historical context of the growing geographical, medical and scientific knowledge that leads to the Modern era appears in both novels to be the foundation for a subject that creates its own form of damnation

and redemption, and controls itself through its own acts of creativity. Both novels clearly participate in the modernist myth of illness as the genesis of creativity; Edmund Wilson's myth of "the wound and the bow,"<sup>5</sup> for instance, suggests a context in which modernist writers have tended to develop a view of (masculine) creative genius as empowered by its subjection or inspired by its sickness.

The inspirational role of disease also turns out to have a bearing on Nicholas's relationship with Girolamo Fracastoro, a young medical student with whom he has a brief but intense friendship. The masochistic dynamic is not exclusively heterosexual or heterosocial; any fixed assignment of genders or sexualities to subjectivity understood as masochistic will only inhibit an understanding of it as a cultural formation and political practice. For Nicholas, the possibility of love for Girolamo is more promising than any of his earlier connections, but it stumbles because of Nicholas's particular way of managing and controlling self-other relations. Nicholas acts insulted by Girolamo's wealth and status, construing his openness as an attempt to belittle Nicholas's relative poverty, but he soon admits his reason for this is really to further his own mode of self-control and empowerment:

Yet was he in reality being thus sorely scorned? Was he not, in discerning, indeed in cultivating this contempt all round him, merely satisfying some strange hunger within him? It was as if he were being driven to add more and more knots to a lash wielded by his own hand. It was as if he were beating himself into submission, cleansing himself, preparing himself: but for what? He hungered, obscenely, obscurely, as under the lash his flesh flinched, went cold and dead, and at last out of a wracked humiliated body his

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund Wilson's classic study reads in the story of Philoctetes "the idea that genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound up together", and applies it to seven modern writers. See Edmund Wilson. *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*. (London: Methuen, 1941). 259. In his 1945 essay, "Art and Neurosis, Lionel Trilling examines the idea that the artist is mentally ill, calling it "one of the characteristic notions of our culture" (160-1). However, for him, the idea that artistic genius can be explained by neurosis, illness, or insanity is not a valid one; rather he argues that "the myth of the sick artist . . . has established itself because it is of advantage to the various groups who have one or another relation with art" (164).

mind soared slowly upward, into the blue. (78)

This transformation of masculine heroism through a metaphorical beating is not the passive reversal of a sadistic psychic impulse. It is best understood as an active practice on Nicholas's part not just because "[i]t was as if he were beating himself," but because he acknowledges and encourages his own self-subjection and submission as a means of controlling his desire by directing it into 'pure' thought. Significantly, Girolamo represents a practical and empirical approach to science, for his studies attempt to connect ideas and theories directly with the physical symptoms of the body. This contrasts directly with Nicholas's desires, even though it is Nicholas who claims "Knowledge . . . must become perception" (36). Girolamo reveals that he hid his study of contagion and the spread of diseases from Nicholas because, he accuses, "You wanted me to be a rake, a rich wastrel, something utterly different from yourself" (82). Clearly, Nicholas expects a certain role of Girolamo, just as he expected a certain attitude from Andreas and from the nobleman Novara about whom Nicholas thinks: "It was not fair!—even if he was dying, Novara had no right to cringe like this; his task was to be proud and cold, to intimidate, not to mewl and whimper, not to be weak. It was a scandal!" (64)). By giving in to Nicholas's complicated attitude toward sensory pleasures, which he enjoys but must always sublimate, Girolamo misses any possibility of dislodging Nicholas's devotion to the ideal world of cosmic harmony and truth.

The focus on Nicholas's coldness and cruelty is contrasted by the intrusion of an opinionated and highly unreliable first-person narrator, Rheticus, in the novel's third section, "Cantus Mundi." Rheticus gives an outside account of Copernicus's life and work, and helps to deliver Banville's intended irony regarding the reception and distortion of the astronomer's ideas. Rheticus is notable because of the curious scandal he invents in an attempt to villify Copernicus and Tiedemann Giese. Rheticus tells of Nicholas's affair with a servant boy named Raphaël, but later admits this was a fiction. However, Rheticus presents Raphaël in similar terms to the "green girl" – that is, as an idealised and aetherial figure of beauty. The Raphaël plot allows

Rheticus to attack Copernicus, yet after own final crisis of faith and the arrival of his own disciple, Otto, he is quick to admit that Raphaël was an invention: “come now, Rheticus, come clean. The fact is, there never was a Raphaël. I know, I know, it was dreadful of me to invent all that, but I had to find something, you see, some terrible tangible thing, to represent the great wrongs done me by Copernicus” (219). Rheticus attacks Nicholas where he most vulnerable, by recalling Nicholas’s relationship with Girolamo and the way his love of beauty must always be sublimated into his intellectual pursuits in order to avoid human contact.

*Doctor Copernicus* ends with what appears to be Nicholas’s redemption and acceptance of the unknowability of the ordinary world. Through his conversation with Andreas, ‘returned’ or imagined as a redeeming angel, Nicholas confronts his failure to interact with the reality of commonplace things. The conversation challenges Nicholas’s isolated, idealist self and his desire for pure, essential meaning, when Andreas argues that “[i]t is the manner of knowing that is important. We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other things: isolate it, and all meaning drains away” (239). Nicholas tries to insist upon the importance of “the belief that we can *know*” (ibid.: original emphasis), but ultimately Andreas’s insistence that “there is no need to search for the truth . . . we *are* the truth” (ibid.; original emphasis) wins out. Andreas’s scarred face is healed, and he announces that he is “the angel of redemption” (241), arrived to take Nicholas away to heaven. Nicholas’s self-division seemingly evaporates, and he is reconciled with his mundane, embodied self as the world “called to him, and called, calling him away” (242).

But there is an important caveat to this reading that has not yet been explored. What are we to make of the signature, “D.C.” that follows the final full stop? How are we to read this ambiguous mark of identity and authorship? It seems to question the closure signalled by Nicholas’s acceptance of the limits of knowledge in two ways. Firstly, we should notice that the acceptance coincides with Nicholas’s death. His reconciliation with that part of his personality symbolised by Andreas is also his redemption, but in an aesthetic sense only, not

on a practical, intersubjective level. After all, this redemption occurs in Nicholas's mind; he does not live it out in practice. Similarly, his acceptance of the irreducibility of "things-in-themselves" arrives just as his consciousness dissolves. Therefore, Banville suggests that the legitimacy of a limited, self-evident form of knowledge, of the faith that "we are the truth. The world, and ourselves, this is the truth" (239) is acceptable only through the loss of subjectivity altogether. A second consideration is that the signature places a question-mark over Nicholas's death. It implies that "Doctor Copernicus" is somehow the author of some or all of this novel, or that this shadowy entity "D.C." survives the death of Nicholas in order to write about him. So instead of a clear resolution that demarcates the limits of subjectivity and the limit between life and death, *Doctor Copernicus* ends with a transcendence of the narrative ontology that places these distinctions under a suspension or contradiction from which they cannot be retrieved.



## 2.2 Kepler

*I know he will meet me there, I'll recognise him by the rosy cross on his breast, and his lady  
with him. Are you there? If I walk to the window now shall I see you, out there in the rain,  
and the dark, all of you, queen and dauntless knight, and death, and the devil . . . ?*<sup>6</sup>

Banville's metafictional foray into the scientific revolution takes up a strikingly different personality and different formal techniques in *Kepler* (1981). While Copernicus was characterised by coldness and a rejection of material existence, Kepler has a family, children, peers, antagonists, and, is continuously obliged (by dint of religious persecution) to travel and have new experiences. Yet he is still, for Banville, a solitary character and an alienated, modernist artist-figure. He longs for "a perfect order and peace in which he might learn to contain his life, to still its fevered thrashings and set it to dancing the grave dance" (10). Like Copernicus, Kepler's intellectual work is contextualised as a struggle against, and transcendence of, the everyday world. Kepler's identity is similarly formed through what I have called a masochistic sublime: a sense of self grounded in the pursuit of intellectual mastery in relation to an absolute which ultimately can never be reached.

Kepler, like his predecessor, is motivated by the antagonism of everyday life to strive for a 'cosmic order.' In Koestler's account, the historical Kepler was acutely aware of his need for self-discipline: in a "self-analysis more unsparing than Rousseau's" (Koestler 234), he described himself as like a dog (a simile Banville maintains (*K* 19)). In addition to Kepler's descriptions of his "dog-like" relationships with others, the passages Koestler quotes also mention how he would expiate the impurity of his soul by "reciting his faults in public" (Koestler 236) and how he was "wounded by love" in his attachment to an unnamed "Venus" (237). This personal material—"a harsh self-portrait even for a modern young man, reared in the age of psychiatry, anxiety, masochism and the rest" (Koestler 237)—made Kepler a perfect candidate for Banville's

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<sup>6</sup> *Kepler*, 191.

particular view of the masculine subject, which persistently represents its activity as passivity and its achievements as losses. It comes as little surprise, then, that despite Kepler's actual, historical triumphs, the struggle for mastery of the world through scientific knowledge in Banville's account of his life finds its apogee in beautiful mistakes and epiphanies, and in the moments when theories are discarded in favour of an unrealised future possibility.

The intellectual realm provides a haven from Kepler's despair at the disordered social and material world. We learn that "disorder had been the condition of his life from the beginning" (11), and, in a statement that recalls the role of disease in *Doctor Copernicus*, that "[l]ife to [Kepler] was a kind of miraculous being in itself, almost a living organism, of wonderful complexity and grace, but racked by a chronic wasting fever" (10). This binary struggle is a reflection of the religious and political upheaval taking place during the period of the Counter-Reformation. Kepler prefers to avoid doctrinal debates, yet is steadfast in his belief in certain ways. Most important is his Pythagorean belief in numbers and geometry as keys to the structure of the cosmos.

Kepler's pursuit of geometric forms as the underlying explanation of physical phenomena represents a Neoplatonic stance characteristic of many early modern scientists (including Newton: Banville's *The Newton Letter* incorporates a parallel between its narrator and Newton's late alchemical interests). In one of his letters, Kepler writes:

the circle which we draw with a compass is only an inexact representation of an idea which the mind carried as really existing in itself. In this I take issue strenuously with Aristotle, who holds that the mind is a *tabula rasa* upon which the sense perceptions write. This is wrong, wrong [. . .] Let me put it thusly: If the mind had never shared an eye, then it would, for the conceiving of the things situated outside itself, demand an eye and prescribe its own laws for forming it. For the recognition of quantities which is innate in the mind determines how the eye must be, and therefore the eye is so, because the mind is so and not vice versa. Geometry was not received through the eyes: it was

already there inside. (149)

This clearly sets out a Neoplatonic absolute which sensory perception can only attempt to imitate. Although Kepler here stresses the genius of the individual mind, he emphasises that this genius is a reflection of God's 'geometrical plan.' Thus, McMinn's argument that Kepler presents a Romantic sensibility of a powerfully humanist "imaginative perception" seems at odds with the historiographic 'layering' that Banville creates here. For it is not the liberal-humanist subject that creates or orders perceptions, but a subject seeking an absolute rule found in God: "It was his principal axiom that nothing in the world was created by God without a plan the basis of which is to be found in geometrical quantities. *And man is godlike precisely, and only, because he can think in terms that mirror the divine pattern.* (25-26; original emphasis). Since he is concerned with discovering a divine order, rather than a human-centred one, the philosophical context of Kepler's life should be understood as Renaissance or Christian humanism (Abrams 82-83). Of course, Kepler's aesthetic views of human nature and existence add a complicating factor to such a designation. However, it is more plausible to consider them as a contemporary projection onto history that Banville makes in order to further his broader artistic purposes.

The Rosicrucian influence seen in the epigraph to this section adds to the combination of Neoplatonic tendencies and modern scientific instincts that Johannes Kepler develops, and it is important that its implications are acknowledged it before proceeding to a more specific discussion of masculinity. In *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Frances A. Yates links the term 'Rosicrucianism' to a "phase in the history of European culture which is intermediate between the Renaissance and the so-called scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. It is a phase in which the Renaissance Hermetic-Cabalist tradition has received the influx of another Hermetic tradition, that of alchemy" (xi). While Rosicrucian documents claim the existence of a secret, mystical order of initiates (the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross) founded by one Christian

Rosencreutz,<sup>7</sup> a fifteenth century monk, Yates argues that the evidence suggests that the secret society itself is most probably a fiction (207). Nonetheless, she notes that Rosicrucian myths and ideas have had a critical influence upon key scientific figures of the seventeenth century. “Kepler’s association with the Rosicrucian world,” she proposes, “is so close that one might almost call him a heretic from Rosicrucianism” (223). A. Rupert Hall summarises Yates’s view in her earlier study, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), as making the argument that “neo-Platonism induced Renaissance men . . . to examine nature with the intent of mastering it . . . [it] gave a new ambition, a new objective for knowledge: power” (Hall 32-33). This is significant in light of Nietzsche’s view that science transforms the metaphysics of Christianity into other modes, so that science becomes simply an alternative means of seeking and controlling power through an absolute “truth” or “being.” If Banville’s Kepler displays such a will to power, it is modified so that its highest expression is the sublime relation to an ideal ‘truth’ or ‘harmony’ which the subject intuits only through the blockage or loss of their power to comprehend it. The effect of this is that the desire for truth and the power it entails is never fully overcome or rejected as false. Instead, this desire is continuously denied and re-instated, perpetuating its hold over thought without ever being resolved.

With this background in mind, we can examine the opening scene of the novel, which sees the young Kepler asleep and dreaming of cosmic harmony, suddenly awakened by his wife, Barbara. He has intuitively grasped the concept of elliptical planetary motion, but in waking loses nearly all memory of it. The perfection of the idea, expressed in the image of an egg, is broken, “leaving only a bit of glair and a few coordinates of broken shell. And 0.00429” (3). Banville’s first lines introduce the opposition between the dream-world of mathematical and astronomical form and the more mundane material and interpersonal world, where his

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<sup>7</sup> As Booker has discussed (184-5), Banville makes a gag out of the resemblance of this name to the names of Hamlet’s attendant lords: “Two kinsmen of Tycho Brahe called on [Kepler] one day at his lodgings in Raben Alley, Holger Rosenkrands the statesman’s son and the Norwegian Axel Gyldenstjern. They were on their way to England. Kepler considered . . . Rosenkrands and Gyldenstjern would be happy to take him with them” (187). In addition to the joke Booker mentions, there may be a sly reference to Rosicrucianism here.

wife is one of the many agents of the interruption of ideal form. This “broken egg”<sup>8</sup> initiates the need for narrative and aesthetic resolution and the return of harmony. And the egg also signifies a notion of masculine autogenesis, a kind of abstract parturition of his astronomical system.<sup>9</sup> Along similar lines, Kepler’s epiphany that the planets of the solar system might be spaced according to ratios determined by the six Platonic solids—apart from reinforcing the more mystical tendencies of his science—provides a kind of immortality: “he thought, with rapturous inconsequence: I shall live forever” (27). The insight places Kepler in an untouchable realm of ideas beyond the limits of the social and material world.

Kepler’s paternal role enlarges upon this connection. His difficult marriage to Barbara is complicated by the early loss of their children; after the death of his second child he “stood by the bedroom window and watched the day fade, hearing vaguely Barbara’s anguished cries behind him and listening in awe to his mind, of its own volition, thinking: My work will be interrupted” (50). This seems less like frustration than like an instinctive desire for his feelings of detachment: the claims of Kepler’s responsibilities provide an interruption that is, paradoxically, desirable, despite being presented in seemingly negative terms. This focus on interruptions sharpens Kepler’s aspirations to a sublime state of knowledge and being. The narrator tells us that

Only the stealthiest of hunters had been vouchsafed a shot at it, and he, grossly armed with the blunderbuss of his defective mathematics, what chance had he? crowded round by capering clowns hallooing and howling and banging their bells whose names were Paternity, and Responsibility, and Domestgoddamnedicity. Yet O, he had seen it once,

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<sup>8</sup> The egg is one of Banville’s favourite images for conveying the notion of form. Kepler’s appearance is at one point described as like a “bejewelled egg” (91). In the fourth section of the novel Kepler describes in a letter how his theory that the orbital path of Mars was egg-shaped led to the discovery that planets move in elliptical orbits. This egg imagery also appears more than once in *Birchwood*, where broken eggs are linked with the abject (B 130–31, 163). Egg images also appear in *The Book of Evidence*, *Athena*, and *The Untouchable*.

<sup>9</sup> The trope is repeated in Kepler’s criticism of Tycho Brahe’s world system, when he recalls saying “a bitch in a hurry will produce blind pups . . . it is misconceived, a monstrous thing sired on Ptolemy out of Egyptian Herakleides” (60; original emphasis).

briefly, that mythic bird, a speck, no more than a speck, soaring at an immense height.  
(19)

As in *Doctor Copernicus*, the idealised intellectual object exists in a sublime “immensity” of flight, which provides an escape from the forces of social conformity acting upon men in the ‘ordinary’ world. This quest for autonomy is built upon a gendered, sublime dynamic, through which ideal form will return in similar moments of interruption or suspension, such as when the “origin of scientific innovation is . . . cast in the mold of classical modernist writing, as revelation or epiphany” (Berensmeyer 157).

Before examining the way that idealised models of femininity and masculinity operate within this sublime economy, it is important to register Kepler’s attitudes to his work. Having gained access to Tycho Brahe’s observations, Kepler’s first major task is to calculate the orbit of Mars. Announcing that he has succeeded, he returns to his calculations in order to enjoy his success, but finds that not all the data fits:

He plodded away from his desk, thinking of daggers, the poison cup, a launching into empty air from a high wall of the Hradcany. And yet, in a secret recess of his heart, a crazy happiness was stirring at the prospect of throwing away all he had done so far and starting over again. It was the joy of the zealot in his cell, the scourge clasped in his hand. And seventeen months were to become seven years before the thing was done. (74-75)

This is, perhaps, a superficially masochistic image. However, its importance lies in its representation of knowledge—as something happily rejected and begun again—rather than because of its presentation of ‘pleasure in pain.’ It is the articulation of an absolute and ideal knowledge that cannot be reached and therefore sustains the desire to reach it indefinitely, that is significant – so much so, in fact, that Kepler’s rejection of his achievements and eagerness to begin his work again seems to overshadow his real scientific advances. In a passage that recalls the earlier image of suicidal desperation, this rejection becomes a matter of equilibrium

or ‘brinkmanship,’ played out between the subject and an idea of perfection: “he had blithely discarded years of work for the sake of a few minutes of arc, not because he had been wrong all those years—though he had—but in order to destroy the past, and begin all over again the attempt to achieve perfection: that same heedless, euphoric sense of teetering on the brink while the gleeful voice at his ear whispered *jump*” (183; original emphasis). This shows that while the harmony of Kepler’s solutions is gratifying, more gratifying still is the process of discarding work in order to pursue a further hypothesis.

Berensmeyer suggests that this repeatedly ‘collapsing’ dynamic becomes, in a way, the unacknowledged purpose of the novel:

The constant necessity of failing and beginning again constitutes a ‘progress’ of science that is not linear and can never be conclusive. In *Kepler*, this progression in spite of constant failure is present on a more personal level than in *Doctor Copernicus*: it arises out of the scientist’s abandonment, even self-sacrifice, to his task, the motivation of which can be understood as the desire to overcome death ... The insistence of this deferral, this ever-continuing attempt at creating a meaningful space of infinite duration as the ultimate aim of man’s ‘excess of impulses’ (Gehlen), has a Beckettian touch to it, a sense of ‘going on’ in spite of apparent failure. (164)

This “meaningful space of infinite duration” is, clearly, a sublime goal, for it is projected beyond the limits of death and human knowledge and is “ever-continuing,” a becoming without limitation. In the case of *Kepler*, this perpetual source of work recalls the Burkean notion of sublime labour. The desire is never for transcendence in total, but rather for the impossible relation with the transcendent that makes possible an incessant seeking. The structure of this deferral is identical to that of the masochistic sublime: by repeatedly submitting to the limit, the future in which this limit might be surmounted, can remain a perpetual and pleasurable

possibility.<sup>10</sup>

The possibility of overcoming death is further illuminated by Rilke's statement that "[O]ur task . . . is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again 'invisibly,' in us" (qtd. in Berensmeyer 165). For Banville, Rilke stands next to Wallace Stevens as a source of aesthetic ideals, and the epigraph to *Kepler*, "Preise dem Engel die Welt" comes from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. There is a great deal of significance in the emphasis Rilke places upon saying, and on evoking being through such saying, in the statement Berensmeyer quotes. Rilke's words suggest a two-way process of subjectivity: first, a painful and passionate "stamping" that almost constitutes a kind of wounding; and second, a "rising" of transcendent, permanent being within us. Structurally, Rilke's poetic handling of the impermanence of the world appears compatible with masochistic subjectivity, since it echoes the sublime structure of a "painful" limitation that in its very articulation produces an unlimitation. The figure of the angel clearly symbolises a redemption through the 'acceptance' of everyday reality, like that provided by Andreas, who appears in angel-form at the conclusion of *Doctor Copernicus*.

Having characterised Kepler's intellectual endeavours and their relationship to the 'interruptions' of his 'ordinary' life, it becomes clearer how his renunciation of intellectual mastery is connected with the novel's presentation of masculinity. Late in the novel, when Kepler asks himself, yet again, "[w]hat was it, this wanton urge to destroy the work of his intellect and rush out on crazy voyages into the real world?" (190), there is a particular voyage he has in mind – one involving the adventurous and dangerous enjoyment of life as embodied by Felix, known as "the Italian." Felix functions as a foil to Kepler in the same way Andreas does for Nicholas in *Doctor Copernicus*. Felix represents tough masculine action and worldliness, that

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault comments on how writing can be used to pre-empt death in a similar way: "[h]eaded toward death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits" (Foucault 1977:54)



stands in opposition to Kepler's intellectual identity: "[Felix's] histories were various. He had been a soldier against the Turks, had sailed with the Neapolitan fleet. There was not a cardinal in Rome, so he said, that he had not pimped for" (67). He arrives very ill from an infected wound to his arm, and is treated by Michael Maier (a real figure who was imperial physician to Rudolf II, and also a significant figure in Rosicrucianism). Kepler and Jeppe, the dwarf, tend to him, and he becomes, to Kepler, an emblem of what he himself is not: "What had he expected? Not love, certainly not friendship, nothing so insipid as these. Perhaps, then, a kind of awful comradeship, by which he might gain entry to that world of action and intensity, that Italy of the spirit . . . In the Italian he seemed to know at last, however vicariously, the splendid and exhilarating sordidness of real life" (69).

Felix is presented as an icon of masculine virility and rogueishness, whose life consists of wandering, fighting, drinking, pimping and cuckolding other men. It is perhaps more than coincidence, then, that in both *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, this kind of social and sexual prowess is associated with Italy. Moreover, the contrast between the cold north and the more "sensual" southern countries is a key feature of Masoch's writings because it defines the icy northern sensibility of the masochistic ideal against a virile southern counterpart. As we saw in *Doctor Copernicus*, Banville's astronomers distance themselves from pleasure mediated by social norms and expectations, preferring to deny it for themselves and instead redirect their energies into a commensurate amplification of their intellectual powers. So, while Kepler "idolises" Felix, it is less because he wishes to emulate him, but because Felix accepts the world as given and, like Andreas, represents a life unconcerned with the esoteric demands of 'ideal forms.' The "splendid and exhilarating sordidness of real life" that Kepler admires marks him as different from Copernicus in that he is able to imagine himself living a life of this kind. Nonetheless, his vicarious enjoyment of proximity to Felix does not diminish his commitment to seeking out the hidden harmony of the universe.

Another important representation of a masculine ideal in the novel is the engraving

of Albrecht Dürer's *Knight with Death and the Devil* (1513) that Kepler carries with him, and which he describes as "an image of stoic grandeur & fortitude from which I derive much solace: for this is how one must live, facing into the future, indifferent to terrors and yet undeceived by foolish hopes" (131). Clad in plate armour, the knight in Dürer's engraving is protected from the world by his strength and indifference to the grotesque figures of Death and the Devil. Kepler admires this ability to cast, like the horseman of Yeats's epitaph, a cold eye on life and on death. Stoic doctrine asserts that the individual ought to accept their sufferings because they are pre-ordained: "It is an ethic of self-sufficient, benevolent calm, with the virtuous peace of the wise man rendering him indifferent to poverty, pain, and death, so resembling the spiritual peace of God. This fortitude and indifference can sound sublime, but also sound like stark insensibility." (Blackburn 2005). The significance of Dürer's engraving and the allusion to Stoic philosophy is that they do suggest a sublime dimension to the acceptance of cruel realities (such as Kepler's loss of several children). The knight's armour produces both protection and a reification of the boundary between the self and the outside world, and this invites the transformation of external pressures and pains into an interior, masochistic power – an ideal "being" that is inaugurated by its formation in unavoidable suffering, and maintained by its constant stoical reinforcement of its borders.

Both Banville's fictions and his critical commentators have also tended to idealise femininity in ways which resemble this partitioning of the body from its surroundings. This is particularly true of Kepler's step-daughter Regina who has "an air of completeness, of being, for herself, a precise sufficiency" (13). By reading Regina as an "aesthetic figure . . . [an] imaginative ideal, a non-intellectual, lyrical image of innate, cryptic beauty" (69), McMinn supplies an uncritical appraisal of the way she functions in the novel. For this is the same discourse that Banville applies to idealisations of natural objects, the mysterious "simple things" which his scientists struggle so hard to come to terms with. Moreover, this has been shown to be an aesthetic technique for consolidating masculine power and social authority, such as in Burke's

and Kant's influential works on the sublime. We are shown that the narrator's thoughts about Regina are very close to Kepler's own; in fact, when describing the circumstances of his second marriage to Susanna, the narrative twice slips into the first or second person, directly addressing Regina (158). She takes on both a personal and philosophical significance which supports the model of masochistic subjectivity we have developed here.

Regina is 'partnered' to Felix in Kepler's imagination, where he constructs her as an ideal of desirability and unobtainability. This connection with Felix is referred to in the epigraph to this section, where they are the "queen and dauntless knight" (191) he dreams of before his death. But they are connected elsewhere as well. Just before Felix's first appearance at Benatek, the narrator notes that Regina "stood at gaze like a gilded figure in a frieze . . . What could she see, that so engrossed her? She might have been a tiny bride watching from a window on her wedding morning" (66). This foreshadows the notion of destiny that will be later reinforced by Dürer's stoic knight, and the dream-marriage between Regina and Felix: "The Italian came forward, clad as a knight of the Rosy Cross. In his arm he carried a little gilded statue, which sprang alive suddenly and spoke. It had Regina's face. A solemn and complex ceremony was being celebrated, and Kepler understood that this was the alchemical wedding of darkness and light" (178). For Kepler, this marriage symbolises the union of his most cherished metaphysical beliefs. It is significant that in all these scenes, Regina is represented as a "marvellous and enigmatic work of art" (100), part of a "frieze" or a "little gilded statue." Like the woman in the painting Freddie Montgomery steals in *The Book of Evidence*, she is positioned in relation to the observer, and circumscribed within a visual economy that decides her place and significance in advance.

Upon Regina's announcement of her wedding, Kepler realises that he loves his stepdaughter and becomes jealous of her fiancé; on both a personal and an abstract, metaphysical level, Kepler sees himself excluded from the mysterious state of being the pair represent. He has lost possession of the image of 'perfect harmony' that Regina once represented to him.

This loss is encapsulated in an image which parodies Renaissance art:

The business was already accomplished in his head, he saw it before him like a tableau done in heraldic hues, the solemn bride and her tall grim groom, a pennant flying and the sky pouring down fat beneficent rays behind the scroll announcing *factum est!* and below, in a draughty underworld all to himself, Kepler inconsolabilis crouched with the hoof of a hunchbacked devil treading on his neck. (102)

This farcical depiction is a visual dramatisation of Kepler's damnation for his desires. However, through its presentation as a tableau framed by rays of sunshine and pennants, it also demonstrates how bounded or framed visual representations are a kind of stage for the masculine subject's unreachable object of desire. This, of course, is a theme which is much expanded upon in Banville's later work, in which paintings are the starting point in confessional narratives that explore a masculine subject's desires and relationship to art. In *Kepler*, this "factum est" presented in art is related thematically to the character of Jakob Wincklemann, a friend Banville invents for Kepler.

Wincklemann, the Jewish lensgrinder who rescues Kepler at Linz, serves a specific function in the novel by thematising the process of looking, and the metaphysical implications it holds. His name is a reference to Johann Winckelmann, the famous German historian of art. The lens and the scrutiny of the painter are among Banville's favourite images for describing the relation between writing and the reality it claims to represent. As such, Wincklemann is Kepler's colleague insofar as he also understands that reality is mediated by its cultural representations. Wincklemann announces that he will "tell you [Kepler] the difference between the Christian and the Jew, listen. You think nothing is real until it has been spoken. Everything is words with you. Your Jesus Christ is the word made flesh!" (47). He suggests that, as a Jew, "there are things in our religion which may not be spoken, because to speak such ultimate things is to . . . to damage them" (ibid.). Thus Wincklemann's role in *Kepler* is much like

Andreas's role in *Doctor Copernicus*: it is to question Kepler's desire to represent the absolute, and his commitment to "[n]ever die, never die" (192).

## Chapter 3

**“A fair conception gone awry”:**

**Historical Representation and**

**Masculinity in *Birchwood* and *The***

***Newton Letter***

### **3.1 Historiography**

The desire to order the past and, in doing so, to understand the self is an obvious feature of both *Birchwood* (1973) and *The Newton Letter* (1982). Their common ground in developing contemporary responses to the legacy of Irish history has already been noted by several critics (Hand 23-66; Lernout 75; McMinn 1999:83). Both novels employ the Big House genre and a number of historical contexts or elements as part of narratives of misrecognition in which the protagonist misinterprets or constructs a view of others that is eventually revealed to be a

delusion. In each novel, the desire for the power to shape representations of the self and the world is negotiated through the analogy of desire for a female other, and both of these desires are inevitably disappointed as the protagonist finds things to be—like the Kantian “thing-in-itself”—endlessly elusive, and ultimately inaccessible to language. As I argue throughout this thesis, this pattern contributes to a narrative of failure that strategically positions the masculine subject to preserve the binary structures that underpin it even while appearing to challenge them, and thus to guarantee control over self-representation – even as this is presented as loss of control.

This turn away from History towards what Nicholas Miller called counter-memorial subjectivity provides a useful context for understanding the way masculinity is structured in these novels. *Birchwood* treats questions about representation and identity in a self-consciously parodic way, introducing conflicting historical contexts, drawing on traditional literary figures as deliberate clichés, and formulating its plot as a disavowal of stable identity. *The Newton Letter* makes this turn even more explicit by presenting a disillusioned historian, who, finding that “words fail [him]” (1), turns away from academic writing to write a narrative of everyday events. First, I examine Conor McCarthy’s thesis that *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* should be read in the context of Irish historiography, and suggest that the ‘metahistorical’ perspective he finds in Banville’s fiction is less a resistance to the ideological component of historical realism than an elaborate submission to its power. In the second section I examine how the novels rely on binary structures to articulate their relation to Irish history and the ways in which this serves Banville’s dramatisation of masculinity. In *The Newton Letter* I focus on the narrator’s misreading of the Lawless family, while for *Birchwood* I discuss how the “doppelganger” personalities of Gabriel and Michael dramatise a fragmented masculinity and parody the tradition of primogeniture and the transfer of power. Following this, I investigate how Banville’s texts intensify the distinction between masculine and feminine and their corollaries, the intelligible and the sensible (or ‘form’ and ‘matter’). I argue that the presentation of

what are often unflinchingly detailed descriptions of the body or of ‘material history’ are not elements of a more ‘encompassing’ historical perspective, but are developed through an aesthetic that creates an exaggerated view of gender difference which serves the sublime dynamic through which masculine subjectivity is presented.

Trying to make sense of the historical context of *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* has been an important task for Banville’s critics. Largely the debate has not been concerned with historical events or realistic representations, for these rarely appear in his work, but rather has focused upon the ways in which Banville exploits the ‘historical’ aspects of literary genres, particularly the Big House novel. Critics have tended to be divided, with many reading this use of genre as an aesthetic device, devoid of historicity, but with others reading it as reference to a concrete materiality that comments directly upon Irish history. In *Birchwood*, the setting cannot be located precisely in historical space or time but it undeniably evokes a vision of Anglo-Irish decadence that, as McMinn puts it, creates “instant associations with decay, political crisis and, significantly, the image of a class of people increasingly out of touch with reality” (1999:32). *The Newton Letter* is less obviously problematic, since there are several references that set it roughly at the time it was written, between summer 1979 and spring 1981. Perhaps the best accounts have acknowledged that such a choice cannot satisfactorily be made. Victor Sage, for instance, argues that the relation between fiction (or the personal fiction of memory) and history serves Banville’s preoccupation with metaphysical themes relating to embodiment, authenticity and gender. He therefore reads *Birchwood* as an interplay between “the entropy of lyric idealism and the processes of incarnate history” (32), but one that ultimately leads to stasis or “moments of the sublime, raised and cancelled in the structural metaphor of ‘petrification’” (36). I will return to this reading later in the chapter.

The best accounts of Banville’s use of the Big House genre view it through a lens of personal association and symbolic form articulated as negation or loss, confirming that Banville’s use of the genre is counter-memorial, rather than historical. Vera Kreilkamp, for instance,



argues that “the physical solidarity of the symbolic, decaying Big House . . . dissolves into a pattern of personal evocation. The house is seldom described, but it is obsessively recalled and lamented—with the focus always on the self-consciously literary angle of vision in the act of recollection, rather than on the object that is lost” (250). Banville has also given critics good reason to consider the house, and particularly the Big House, as something of a personal symbol, even if his “literary angle of vision” is always a parodic or metafictional one. He has stated that he chose the Big House setting for *Birchwood* because it was “the most clichéd thing in Irish fiction” (Banville 1997:19), but also associated it with a (negative) statement of identity as an Irish writer:

The only direct statement I’ve ever made in any book that I have written is at the end of *Birchwood* where the protagonist says: ‘I’ll stay in this house and I’ll live a life different from any the house has ever known’ (p.174). And that is my statement. I stay in this country but I’m not going to be an Irish writer. I’m not going to do the Irish thing.’ (ibid.)

This is a curiously emphatic statement—even a petulant one—for a writer who elsewhere has claimed “I don’t really think that specifically ‘national’ literatures are of terribly great significance . . . I feel a part of my culture. But its purely a personal culture gleaned from bits and pieces of European culture of four thousand years. It’s purely something I have manufactured” (qtd. in Sheehan 412). Aside from the literary or formal opportunities afforded by using ‘Irish’ content, Banville’s resistance to participation in any kind of nationalist discourse resonates with the ‘outsider’ figure his novels repeatedly re-write – bewildered men, abandoned by the powers of language and frustrated in their desires for knowledge, power and sex. As we will see, it also corroborates the discussion of a crisis in historiography that will follow. It should be noted, however, that this wariness of Irish identity is particularly evident in the early part of Banville’s career. Houses remain important in later fictions such as *Ghosts* or *Eclipse*,

forming what Neil Murphy has called the “hallucinatory *topos*” (10) of Banville’s architectural spaces: they provide formal image-structures that are integral to the protagonist’s memory or imagined desires but are rarely linked to socio-economic or historical contexts.

By employing certain historical elements, particularly those of the Big House tradition, Banville frames *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* not only as counter-memorial narratives of personal memory and identity, but as texts that connect a specific view of masculinity with the loss of an essentialist foundation for realist discourse. Before analysing McCarthy’s reading of Banville’s relationship to Irish historiography, a brief examination of the opening of *Birchwood* should help to establish the importance of the theme of emasculation to this relationship. In that novel, narrator Gabriel Godkin presents a view of subjectivity as an experience of fragmentation and loss marked by unrecoverable and imperfect memories. Memory offers him a tantalising but incomplete form of access to self-understanding, and one that impacts upon his entire present and future as well, since he announces that “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (11). Imhof suggests that *Birchwood* is not about knowledge but about the search for order and narrative coherence: “Gabriel’s [quest] is first and foremost not an epistemological quest, but one directed at making sense of the past by remembering it and, more importantly, by writing it down in the form of a sustained narrative” (1989:54). In other words, *Birchwood* is primarily concerned with the way in which choices of narrative form enable or limit self-realisation in writing. These concerns are closely linked to a specific image of debilitated masculinity in the opening paragraphs of the novel:

I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable. In this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my memories, fingering them, like an impotent casanova his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets. Some of these memories are in a language which I do not understand, the ones that could be headed, *the beginning of the old life*. (11; original emphasis)

By inverting Descartes' famous phrase ("cogito ergo sum"), Gabriel denies that reason is the fundamental basis of knowledge about existence, and links this to an image of dominant masculinity made impotent. From the very outset, he positions himself as powerless to shape his memories into the narrative form of his choosing. If man is an 'existing animal' before he is a thinking one, then all manner of relationships predicated upon the ability to narrate heterosexual male desire will be upset: the Big House becomes "lawless" (a punning reference to the re-occupation of the house by its traditional owners upon the absence of a male Godkin heir), the narrator-hero loses his command of language, and Dante's desire for Beatrice will not herald *la vita nuova* but rather an "old life." Remembering and narrating the past, figured both as textual decipherment and translation from a foreign language, is here not only an issue for identity but also specifically for the construction of masculinity.

For Gabriel, the past offers a sense of identity that defies simple historical realism; as suggested above, I describe this impulse to archive an alternative, individual 'history,' in defiance of historical realism, as counter-memorial. Reproducing his memories is described as a kind of fetish, marked by compulsive physical gestures ("poring," "fingering," "sniffing"), through which he expresses a desire to know his past with certainty, but at the same time denies the capacity to do so. Conventionally, the relation between subjects and objects of historical knowledge is understood as mutually reinforcing: objective knowledge presupposes stable subjectivity, and vice versa. Gabriel disavows that stable relation, so that when he begins his quest for his invented sister, or writes of the "thing-in-itself,"<sup>(13)</sup> he is self-consciously seeking an ideal that he knows is impossible. In fact, he informs the reader that he sees the past (even before he was born) "through a glass sharply . . . [through] a gathering of perfect prisms" (21). and that "if I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing" (ibid.). He implies that the prism of imagination or artistic form will provide the most authentic version of the past, surpassing even a more objective, collectively authorised discourse.

Critical accounts of *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* have explored many of the linkages with history and politics that are just as important to these texts as their aesthetic features – as we will see, they are intimately connected to them. I will now turn to one of the most sustained and complex studies of the historical dimension of Banville’s fiction, in order to explain how it might be supplemented by my reading of masculinity. McCarthy’s chapter “Irish metahistories: John Banville and the revisionist debate” (2000:80-134) is an important piece of work, since it stands apart from purely ‘literary’ criticism at the boundary between literature and historical narrative. I will argue that McCarthy’s position that Banville intervenes in a specifically Irish historiographic debate is largely compatible with the account I have given of counter-memory and the structural logic of masochism to characterise masculine subjectivity in Banville’s fiction.

Focusing on the period of transition in Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, McCarthy’s study connects what David Lloyd calls ‘crises of representation’ in both history and literature with Banville’s fiction in order to “try to understand the moment of crisis in Ireland at the beginning of the 1970s in the work of historians” (McCarthy 105-6). The connection is, as McCarthy states, that “a major part of the interest of [Banville’s] books lies in this representation and self-representation of crisis” (112). McCarthy places Banville’s relation to 1970s historiography in a much longer context by relating it to the development of the genre of historical narrative in the 19th century and the fragmentation that characterised the Irish uptake of the genre, both at that time and continuing into the present (121-28). He suggests that Banville’s disillusionment with language in his works of fiction is “the formal analogue of Eagleton’s argument that language in nineteenth-century Ireland was ‘strategic for the oppressed but representational for their rulers’” (114). This associates realism and referentiality with conformity to the project of nationalism, and metafictional or experimental language-use with resistance, diversity and difference. Also noting Banville’s comments on the estrangement inherent in the Irish usage of the English language (Banville 1981:14), McCarthy establishes a

strong case for linking the crises of Banville's protagonists with the particular development and contexts of Irish historiography. Significantly, while McCarthy makes a case for the importance of historical context, he links Banville's fiction less with facts of history than with the history of changes in the form of historical representation itself.

In studying this crisis of representation, McCarthy gives a central place to Althusser's account of interpellation in the relationship between subjects and historical discourse. He notes the underlying influence of Althusser on Lloyd's view of the social function of the novel and its relation to 'crisis' (McCarthy 106): one of the aims of Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* is an "analysis of the hegemonic role of culture in the formation of citizen-subjects" (Lloyd 7). McCarthy also identifies Althusser's influence on another of his main sources, Hayden White (McCarthy 106; White 86-7), and Althusser surfaces yet again in a quote from Frederic Jameson on the necessity of re-organising historiography with new narrative procedures as a response to this crisis of representation (McCarthy (128-29). Indeed, such an account of the interpellation of subjects by historical discourse is implicit throughout McCarthy's perspective, as well as in my discussions of subjectivity and power undertaken in Chapter One.

McCarthy also draws our attention to White's comments on the importance of narrative form in maintaining power structures. For White, narrative form is central to the ideological dimension of historiography, because it is the primary vehicle connecting reader-subjects with 'appropriate' beliefs and values within social strata. This is not because of any particular content, but because narrative "is especially well suited to the production of notions of continuity, wholeness, closure, and individuality that every 'civilized' society wishes to see itself as incarnating" (87). Because of this, White suggests that realist narrative, be it historical or literary, tends to "produce the mentality of the 'law-abiding' citizen" (ibid.). Consequently, McCarthy situates Banville's fiction within a perspective that understands narrative form as promoting the existing social hierarchy as a natural state of affairs and representing the in-

terests of powerful individuals and groups, while experimentation or challenge to these forms can be seen as challenges to the political status quo: he asserts that Banville's fiction "turns the Emperor's clothes inside-out" (112). It is worth noting that this argument is similar to the view of poststructuralism as a challenge to various kinds of authority through its understanding of referentiality and identity as closures of an indeterminate network of ever-evolving meanings, and its celebration of that openness and difference within identity.

For McCarthy this political dimension, flowing from the ways narrative constructs projected social positions and values for reading subjects, manifests itself in historical and literary writing in two main ways. Firstly, both genres share a pre-occupation with verisimilitude, "the production of effects of truth – as much as with positive truth itself" (116). This commonality goes back at least to the cross-fertilisation between literary and historical realisms during their development in the 18th and 19th centuries, but is also still a feature of contemporary debates on postmodern history and fiction. Secondly, both "novel and historical treatise are crucially dependent on narrative patterns, literary tropes and the deployment of 'interexts' [sic]" (ibid.). Both points underscore McCarthy's comparison between historical realism as the ideological instrument of the nation-state and historiographic metafiction as a challenge to this. Based on this comparison, he argues that unlike "academic historians, who unwittingly reveal their relationship to the state and to political authority," whose texts form an implicit defense of the "political and cultural representational dispensation" endorsed by the state, Banville's writing "exposes authorial authority and the conceptual apparatus upon which his books depend" (112).

Such broad socio-political critique is linked with psychology and the operation of power within the subject by Hayden White's account of how historical narratives act on individuals. Because the historical past can seem alien, as when Gabriel states "[o]utside is destruction and decay. I do not speak the language of this wild country" (*B* 174), or familiar, as when the Newton historian slips into biographical mode and reels off a few facts about the great scientist

(NL 6), it is particularly suited to producing what White calls “fantasies of freedom under the aspect of a fixed order, or conflict under the aspect of resolution” (89). Our attitudes toward the past are intimately connected to the processes of subject formation and regulation and the way we want to understand our present. This is because the past can be

in a word, ‘uncanny,’ both known and unknown, present and absent, familiar and alien, at one and the same time . . . [it] has all the attributes that we might ascribe to the psychological sphere of ‘the imaginary,’ the level of infantile fantasies and narcissistic projections that feeds off dreams of uninhibited mastery and control of objects of desire. (White 89)

White sees that the way individuals relate to the past is not necessarily rational in the first instance. If historical realism gives license to the imagination—the fantasy relation to one’s objects of desire—at the same time as it circumscribes the subject within the symbolic system, then a rejection of historical realism implies a re-arrangement of the relation between its public symbolic domain and the writing and reading subjects involved in this rejection. White’s discussion suggests that the relation of the subject to the “reality effects” of the past is complex and is embedded in a fundamental desire for “uninhibited mastery.” This suggests that the turn away from History at the level of (literary) narrative form does not necessarily imply a rejection of its ideological effects on “citizen-subjects.” The way the Newton historian turns from his “embalming” biographical project to immediately play the “confident novelist, confirming the reader’s prejudices about the Lawlesses” (Sage 31) invites us to examine more closely the subjective dimension of this ambivalent relationship to the “uncanny” past.

Much of White’s argument has been implicit in my discussion of the influence of counter-memory on Banville’s fiction. Moreover, this discussion is supported by the frequency with which Banville has his protagonists muse upon the uncanny presence of the past – and particularly so in the novels under discussion here. In *Birchwood*, Gabriel writes that it is not

“Birchwood of which [he] had dreamed, but a dream of Birchwood, woven out of bits and scraps” (12). There is no ‘real’ Birchwood beneath his narrative, only a dream of a dream. Similarly, the Newton historian has “lost [his] faith in the primacy of text” (1), and can no longer tie words to things in any absolute way. White’s understanding of power can clearly be applied to Banville’s fiction in order to gain a different understanding of what McCarthy calls Banville’s exposure of authorial authority (112). If, as White suggests, historical realism is an ideology that offers an ‘imaginary’ individual relation to the past that is in fact brought under the rein of a symbolic collective one, then the subversion of narrative forms (and thus of historical realism) by literary texts can be considered resistance to, or critique of, this ideology. However, I wish to consider the sense in which any critique of traditional historiography mounted by Banville here is compromised by the fact that his narrators question historical realism as a consequence of their desire for control over their ‘ideal language’ despite their concessions to the effects of modernist and postmodernist theories of literary and historical representation. The desires of Banville’s narrators are aligned with the subversion of the ideology of historical realism and the subject it ‘produces’ insofar as they perform strategic disavowals of the power to narrate and of access to the past through language. However, this strategy has the narrators maintain the contradictory position of stating that “the past is incommunicable” (*B* 29), while they continue to present it to the reader. But this contradiction is in fact a means of pre-empting or controlling the loss of essentialist symbolic meaning—which is here associated with ideologies of colonial rule and patriarchal authority—by creating narratives that embrace the ‘impossible’ and the uncanny qualities of the past. We can read Gabriel’s and the Newton historian’s supererogatory affirmations of an ‘uncanny’ historical awareness, of a presence that is simultaneously absence, as efforts to protect an idealised subjectivity and an idealised notion of the ‘real.’ By emphatically presenting these things as impossible, and by portraying themselves as hopeless idealists who suffer constant disappointment, Banville’s narrators articulate a structure of self that is analogous to the self-preserving politics of masochism.



McCarthy actually suggests a good example of this from *Doctor Copernicus*, in which the meeting between Nicholas and Albrecht, Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, connects historical narrative with narcissistic dreams of power. Albrecht confronts Nicholas with the implications of his intellectual isolation through the “parallels between absolutist power and intellectual authority” (McCarthy 130). Albrecht will happily slaughter as many people as necessary to achieve his political goals, which he frames in terms that are analogous to Nicholas’s intellectual goals: “The people—peasants, soldiers, generals—they are my tool, as mathematics is yours, by which I come directly at the true, the eternal, the real” (DC 136). Crucially, McCarthy sees Albrecht’s violent political authority as deriving from his notion of historical importance, and his entitlement to what Edward Said has called “permission to narrate” (qtd. in McCarthy 131). McCarthy demonstrates the implication that although Nicholas (and Banville’s other protagonists) rarely rise to the levels of violent self-assertion glorified by Albrecht, they seek them out in the form of intellectual and narrative authority. I generally agree with this reading, but it fails to acknowledge the fact that not only are Banville’s protagonists very much unlike Albrecht—in fact they are largely apolitical in their concerns—but they present their narratives as elaborate disavowals of their power to shape the world rather than as intellectual or ‘abstract’ sources of authority.

This problem relates directly to the masochistic structure by which subjectivity guarantees what I would also call “permission to narrate” through enactments of its own perpetual failure. Just as the masochist welcomes punishment or pain in order to guarantee the future possibility of pleasure—and especially the containment of this possible pleasure in narratives of self-conflict—the constant disavowal of adequate narration by subjects whose past is always “indeterminate” and deceptive serves to guarantee them a similar (if paradoxical) form of narrative control, guided by the aesthetics of the sublime. McCarthy’s argument acknowledges but tends to play down the aesthetic aspects of Banville’s work—his valorisation of aesthetic suspense, and his protagonists’ frequent paeans to the (negative) unity offered by the

imagination—but it is these aspects that are central to the way in which Banville’s fiction resists authorising a historicised unity. While Banville’s texts portray the disappearance of a stable relation to the past, they do so in order to produce the slimmest possibility of a recuperation of aesthetic unity and closure (what Frank Kermode famously called a “sense of an ending”) through the structure of the sublime. By emphasising their relation to the unknowable and the things they cannot present in narrative, these narrators project beyond the limits of their text a kind of negative unity that can only ever be conflicted and tentative, yet endows them with an intuition of closure. This means that our view of disavowals of the possibility of representation and dramatisations of the incompleteness of the self should be modified to understand these moves as guarantees of a kind of ‘destiny,’ and that they actually generate a certain pleasure of the text precisely through their announced limitations.

This sublime structure is evident in the way Gabriel Godkin and the Newton historian frequently underline their inability to narrate. For instance, the final lines of *Birchwood* incorporate a quotation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous ending to *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. Gabriel concludes that “some secrets are not to be disclosed under pain of who knows what retribution, and whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent” (B 175). Wittgenstein’s first work was written as a structured account of the relation between language and facts that would define what could and could not be stated about the world. He considered that there were some things that could be “shown” but not “said,” including some of the lessons of the *Tractatus* itself. While Wittgenstein’s later work rejected the rigid definitions of the *Tractatus* and moved towards a context-based view of meaning as the product of “language-games,” there is a special appeal in Wittgenstein’s highly formalist early philosophy for Banville. Gabriel’s announcement of “secrets [that] are not to be disclosed” ties the strict limits suggested by the early work of Wittgenstein to secrecy and punishment. This turns a distinctly objective, logical statement into a subjective one that, in its declarative display of a confessional impossibility, prefigures the performative confessions of *The Book of Evidence*. The parting quotation

calls the secrets of the past unsayable, but the scrupulous nature of Wittgenstein's precision is corrupted by Gabriel's enjoyment of the implied guilt of revealing them. This generates an intuition of "supersensible" possibility that is immanent to the impossible, contradictory subject who crafted it.

Also worth noting here is Richard Eldridge's reading of Wittgenstein's "preoccupation with autonomy and with the realization and confirmation of genius" (107) alongside the romantic subjectivity exemplified by Goethe. Although I must pass over many of the connections between Goethe and Banville relevant to the concerns of this chapter (not least of which is the fact that *The Newton Letter* is an ironic re-writing of *Elective Affinities* (Imhof 145-47)), Eldridge's discussion of the intense tumultuous states of subjectivity shared by Goethe's character Werther and Wittgenstein offers some significant insights. Werther embodies a specifically modern form of subjectivity, which has "a desire for singularity, specifically a desire to desire, intensely and infinitely" (Eldridge 101). This desire, clearly an example of the kind of strategic articulation of subjectivity at work in masochism, is the cause of Werther's "hyperbolizing imagination" (103) which dominates both his descriptions of nature and his relationship with Charlotte. We can read Gabriel Godkin's statement of the limits of language as partaking in a tradition of romantic subjectivity that preserves its power through severe self-discipline.

In an almost equally stark circumscription of the power to make meaning, the narrator of *The Newton Letter* announces at the outset that he has "lost [his] faith in the primacy of text" (1), and states that "I can't go on, I'm not a historian anymore" (82). The latter line echoes the ending of Beckett's *The Unnameable* and also provides a disavowal of the power to narrate that is immediately contradicted. Yet he does continue to narrate, and mis-applies as much of his curiosity about human relationships and social structures to the Lawless family as is possible. It becomes apparent that it is the text, and not the reality of the people he encounters, that has the most impact; when Ottilie tells him about the family, he barely listens to her, the "mass of names and hazy dates numbed me . . . [they were] like the stories in

a history book, vivid and forgettable at once” (33). The irony of *The Newton Letter* is that the narrator’s claimed turn away from historical discourse results not in a renewed awareness of the immediacy of everyday reality he claims, but an ‘unconscious’ application of cultural and historical stereotypes, especially ones concerned with masculinity. Banville’s historian is embarrassed at his lapse of professionalism, seeing himself as “ridiculous and melodramatic, and comically exposed” (2) – a position so many of Banville’s men unconvincingly pretend not to enjoy.

A significant challenge to this reading is the argument put forward by Elke D’hoker, that through the renunciation of his book and his relinquishment of a metaphysical ideal of presence the Newton historian demonstrates a negative aesthetics: “[i]n suggesting presence indirectly, through in fact affirming absence, this via negativa is the very opposite of his pre-crisis use of imagery which tried, but failed, to make reality present by directly naming it” (2002a:39). D’hoker suggests that the Newton historian accepts the disjunction between the self and the world, and the lesson that some things cannot be fully represented and ‘possessed’ through language. Consequently, we should consider that the novel’s “resigned conclusion bears witness to the postmodern predicament which suggests that the battle against mastery, symbolic expression and illusions of unity is as necessary as it is unending” (43). Although D’hoker is concerned with negative aesthetics in a similar way to my own perspective, her reading is similar to McCarthy’s in that both understand the Newton historian as resisting a position of mastery over representation. However, both critics understand the subject as existing prior to language, and as agents who use language in an instrumental way. For them, renunciations of the representational power of language are taken as given, and the strategy of “showing” what cannot be “said” in the manner Wittgenstein suggested is endorsed. However, if we understand Banville’s narrators as undertaking a strategic performance of identity in order to position themselves in relation to changing landscapes of power—especially those of gender and identity politics—then the “battle against mastery” can be understood less as public polit-

ical action and more as the internal conflict of a subject that projects an image of masculinity locked into an inevitable dynamic of struggle, failure, and an almost-impossible sublime destiny. Moreover, the centrality of gender and heterosexual desire to the ways historical realism is challenged in *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* indicates that Banville's dramatisations of 'discursive failure' are far from ideologically neutral; for instance, the dichotomy of "saying" and "showing" anticipates the sharply defined gender positions thematised through visual art in *The Book of Evidence* and its sequels. Denying a metaphysics of presence does not mean that this negative aesthetic does not still rely upon it. D'hoker seems to lend at least some support toward such a reading through her description of this "battle" as both "necessary" and "unending."

Through the combination of an apparent challenge to the ideological form of historical realism and a re-assertion of that form in the Newton historian's misreading of the Lawlesses, Banville seems to be playing with the tendency in Irish literary studies whereby, as C. L. Innes puts it, "[m]ale critics and male writers alike have . . . been absorbed in the 'family romance' which becomes linked to the colonial relationship; their concern is to challenge the authority of the father – the colonial power and the colonial cultural hegemony and tradition" (4). Thus, Banville's ironic treatment of his narrator's romanticisation of the Lawlesses' Anglo-Irish cultural pedigree reveals an awareness of the links between sexual and post-colonial politics. The narrator errs in his assumptions about the Lawlesses' religion and class background just as he does in his speculations on their family structure, especially the parentage of Michael. At one point he goes so far as to suggest that Edward married into the family then forced a sexual relationship with Ottilie which produced Michael. In reality, Michael is adopted, and it is the narrator who has behaved shamelessly, sleeping with Ottilie while fantasising about Charlotte. The narrator's assumption that Edward is a villain reveals an aspiration to rectify a 'patriarchal' abuse of power. His obsession with the assumption that Edward is a drunkard who mistreats Charlotte and Ottilie becomes analogous to the male critic's focus on abuses of colonial and

patriarchal authority. Even when as he learns tidbits of information that force him to alter his perception of the Lawlesses—that they are Catholics, not Protestants (64), for instance—he tends to revise his interpretation to make Edward even more reprehensible.

The narrator's hypocritical position only really crumbles at the end of the novel, when he finally learns that Edward is dying of cancer. However, readers get a hint that the two are linked early on when the narrator describes the malaise that prevents him from finishing his biography and wonders "[w]as that a lump I felt there, a little, hard, painless lump . . . ?" (7). Midway through the novel, when Edward asks the narrator what he thinks of women, the narrator is reluctant to participate in a heart-to-heart, disliking the cliché of "old boys together, the booze and the blarney, the pissing into the wind. In a minute we'd be swapping dirty stories" (40). Edward wants to complain about women, perhaps Charlotte in particular, but gets no further than admitting that "[t]hey have to love too, get what they can, fight, claw their way. It's not their fault if..." (ibid.). One ending to that sentence might be "if they have to struggle with men to get what they want." The ambiguity is cleared up somewhat by Edward's subsequent outburst: "Succubus! Know that word? It's a grand word, I like it" (ibid.). The narrator recalls the word succubus at the end of the novel (96), when the fact that Edward is dying of cancer has finally been spelled out for him, and in this later context Banville has his historian imply, perhaps, that he sees how he himself has attached himself like a parasite to the Lawlesses in through the "horrid drama" (95) he dreamt up. Clearly, his attempt to uncover Edward's 'mis-treatment' of Charlotte and Ottilie was also an attempt to criticise the ideological position associated with colonial paternalism. But if the turn away from historical realism highlights the ideological effects history writing generates as McCarthy argues, but cannot dispel them, we must interrogate the notion of a "metahistorian" (McCarthy 120) who can except himself from the culture and history in which he lives. The "staging" of the "crisis of authorial authority in narrative culture" (McCarthy 114) may well be a crisis that maintains the narrative and ideological structures it seems to question. This possibility is supported to

the conclusion reached in *Birchwood*, too; although Gabriel's family was a living example of the perversion and madness produced by a desire for absolute power and of the fragmentation of the "ideal" male heir (God's kin), and although he runs away with the circus and experiences the violent oppression of the peasantry by their colonial masters, he still returns, inherits the manor and writes his story.

These patterns suggest that the rejection of the form of historical realism does not extract Banville's protagonists from the desire for a stable discursive foundation on which to base their relation to the past. Nor does it provide a model for this foundation other than the one based on the 'crisis' of class and gender structures that remain largely unchanged. If Gabriel left his house, or if the Newton historian moved into Ferns with Otilie and their child, these structures might really be changed. However, these are not the goals of Banville's male narrators. The politics of counter-memory cannot take a positive form; rather it revolves around the negation and projected sublime destiny indicated by Gabriel's silence and by the historian's prediction: "Shall I awake in a few months, in a few years, broken and deceived, in the midst of new ruins?" (97).

The Newton historian's continual reliance upon the Anglo-Irish mythology he has constructed becomes evident in an episode that weaves an undertone of political violence into his relationship to the Lawlesses. The Mittlers, Edward's sister and brother-in-law and their twin girls, arrive for Michael's birthday. Ironically, they are not particularly welcome (Mittler means "mediator," and like the quartet of main characters comes directly from Goethe's *Elective Affinities*), for Bunny Mittler is a cagy, suspicious woman who basks in the presence of Charlotte and Edward's misfortunes and whose presence is antagonising rather than soothing. When Bunny proposes they toast the "glorious twenty-seventh," the narrator thinks he recognises her reference, assuming she is remembering the assassination of Mountbatten. He tries to anticipate their attitude, and says "Terrible thing, terrible" (44), but he thinks to himself: "One of their dwindling band of heroes, cruelly murdered. I was charmed; only *they* would dare

to make a memorial of a drawing-room tea party” (ibid.; original emphasis). However, Bunny has the Warrenpoint ambush in mind (45) and is not proposing a memorial but applauding the deaths and condoning further violent action; she follows up by exclaiming “There’s nothing wrong with this country . . . that a lot more corpses like that won’t cure” (ibid.). Far from being a mediator, Bunny militantly opposes the ‘family romance’ of colonialism and advocating for ‘divorce’ from England. Her comments attack the narrator’s romantic view of the declining Anglo-Irish heritage he thinks he is surrounded by through the very metaphor of harmonious love and natural attraction between opposites (derived from *Elective Affinities*), which indirectly suggests once again that his turn away from historical realism does not really do away with the identities and values it draws upon. Derek Hand has observed that “in a specifically Irish situation, the importance of narrative is accentuated: stories . . . become a way to contain and combat the reality of violence and power struggles. When the ability to narrate breaks down or is abandoned, then what remains is the potential for all too real violence” (55). This may be so, but it would be more accurate to say that in *The Newton Letter* stories are the reality of violence and power struggles, for even in their abandonment they can provide ideological structures within which thinking and representation takes place.

While Hand is correct to link Banville’s narratives of self with issues of national identity, the degree to which those narratives connect with realist history is minimal. McCarthy’s argument that Banville demonstrates the limitations of realist historiography is also limited, for as we have seen this demonstration is only possible because of his narrators’ reliance upon the social meanings produced by realism. The relation to history in these fictions must be understood on the level of the subject, and particularly the powers and limitations on that subject in articulating identity and forming relations (however abstract or solipsistic) with others, through narrative. Equally, it is important to identify the effects of aestheticisation but continue to be able to critique it. For instance, when Hand recognises the indefensibility of Banville’s representation of women, he suggests that because “they are unknowable means that



they are like everybody else for the main characters” (113). The deaths of Rosie and Ida in *Birchwood* or the murder in *The Book of Evidence* show that this is untrue at a basic level. Women are unknowable in specific, culturally constructed ways in Banville’s fiction. As I will explore further in the next section, the satirisation of the Newton historian and the misrecognitions of Gabriel Godkin’s quest-narrative ultimately leave the gender stereotypes they employ unchanged. This is because of the inevitable appeal the novels make to a sublime aesthetic: the Newton historian writes his letter from an Arctic landscape, in flight—like Frankenstein chasing his monster across the tundra—from the politics and relationships of home and re-dedicated to his intellectual struggles rather than participating in the new life Otilie offers him in Ireland. Likewise, Gabriel seals himself off from the “destruction and decay” of his “wild country” (174) inside Birchwood house and writes about the outside world even though, like Newton, he claims not to speak its language. This aesthetic of perpetual desire, self-discipline and isolation might seem a stoic response to the impossibility of history, but from another point of view it guarantees the power to narrate while appearing to be powerless.

### 3.2 Air and Angels

At the same time as presenting crises in the form of historical representation and in their subject matter, *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* interrogate another of the broad themes I have sought to connect to Banville's presentation of masculine subjectivity in this thesis: namely, the crisis of the "body of reason" described by Judith Butler that I outlined in Chapter One. Butler's phrase describes an ideal rational body (identified closely with rationality and masculinity in the philosophical traditions from which it derives) that is in fact a "dematerialization of masculinity" (1993:49). This image or figure of the body becomes disembodied through its idealisation of form, and so demands that others—especially women—signify the body, or rather signify the unformed materiality that is the body without form. This implicit understanding of masculinity's relation to the body as structured through the distinction between ideas and matter is therefore a relation of disavowal and return – a return of the repressed, or a haunting of the mind by the body it seeks to rationalise. It is connected obliquely to the masochistic structure of subjectivity that is central to Banville's fiction because of the way their narratives expose their desire for ideas, even their desire for desire, rather than a desire for real people and real relationships. The Newton historian tells how when he and Otilie were having sex

gliding my lips across her belly, I glanced up and caught her gazing down with tears in her eyes. This passionate scrutiny was too much for me, I would feel something within me wrapping itself in its dirty cloak and turning furtively away. I had not contracted to be known as she was trying to know me. (35)

The expression "contracted to be known" is particularly suggestive here. Among the possible meanings (sexual, epistemological, emotional) is a faint echo of the masochistic contract: the

historian limits his relationship with Otilie to one of sexual pleasure, and when she demonstrates that she feels more than this he absents himself. Despite their attempts to remain isolated, however, the reality of the body always returns to haunt Banville's male characters and to demonstrate the crisis of the "body of reason." This crisis is analogous to the other crises explored in this chapter through which Banville's narrators present their powerlessness.

Victor Sage makes some similar observations when he identifies the ambivalent, "lyric subjectivity of this (male) point of view" (29) that Banville trains on the Big House. He suggests that Banville's narrators, looking in on the "built-in political and religious complexity" (ibid.) of the Big House genre from a post-Catholic point of view, narrate a constant interplay between an aesthetic or lyrical idealism that "pulls towards light, silence, and stillness" (ibid.), and a historical and material world that contains both decay and the possibility of new life. "At the level of form," he writes, "this ambivalence presents itself characteristically as a struggle between lyric entropy, ironically enshrined in the selfconscious but egoistic fictionalising of a male narrator, and the processes of a historical, or even a historicised, perception" (30). Sage sees history as analogous to embodiment or materiality: the "stubbornly incarnate Otilie" (32) is 'in history' while the Newton historian insulates himself from it with his elaborate "ascendency" fictions. Similarly, Sage argues that Gabriel's privileged social position isolates him from the 'real' history of the agrarian uprising in which Michael participates, so that Gabriel "seems only to inhabit the threshold of a biography, endlessly negotiating through the act of memory to join his own past, and endlessly failing" (36). In showing the historical to be negotiated through a distinction between mind and matter in what Sage calls Banville's aesthetic of "petrification," he also suggests the possible recuperation of a sublime ideal of subjectivity, as I noted at the start of this chapter (Sage 36).

In both *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* Banville brings about an unexpected "return" of some material element that had been excluded by the idealistic imagination of his protagonist. In *Birchwood*, we get all sorts of violent reminders: Rosie's "terrible swollen"

body falling out of the coffin (151), the agrarian rebellion in which the Molly Maguires attack the house, and especially Michael, wearing a white dress because he has been part of that rebellion, finally shattering the 'sister fantasy' by which Gabriel avoided the reality of their relationship (167). In *The Newton Letter* this return to materiality reveals the extent of the narrator's self-centredness in terms of the fiction he creates about the Lawlesses: the physical realities are Edward's stomach cancer, Charlotte's valium-induced feeble-mindedness, and, eventually, Ottilie's pregnancy. There is also a subtle echo of the angel names in *Birchwood*: as the narrator leaves Ferns, he notes that Michael appears to have grown up: "[n]ot a golden bow and arrow, but a flaming sword would have suited him now" (91). In both novels, truths about sexuality, desire and the body that had been obscured by the projection of an idealised image return with the full force of history, revealing the "wilful blindness" (NL 96) of the narrator.

As I have suggested, the turn away from historical realism toward counter-memorial narratives in these novels is, in both cases, played out through the apparent critique of patriarchal or colonial relations. But just as the Newton historian's narrative of quotidian life turns out to rely on a colonial or postcolonial mindset, the radical doubt Gabriel Godkin casts over his ability to narrate in *Birchwood* results in a re-assertion of his capacity to absorb and continue to write his own history. Butler's notion of the "body of reason," a kind of neurotic image of masculinity in the interstices of modern philosophy that constantly seeks to shore up the ideal of a rational, non-material subjective unity, provides further leverage for unpacking the complex reversals at work in this rejection (and possible re-affirmation) of history. In particular, this last part of the chapter will examine Banville's parody of primogeniture through the twin narrative in *Birchwood*, a device which provides a unique way of connecting the internal crisis of subjectivity with the disintegration of Anglo-Irish colonial authority and the violence of Irish history. Following this, it will explore further instances of the ways this pair of novels characterises historical representation through the mind-matter distinction.

An important way in which *Birchwood* develops its turn away from history is through its preoccupation with doubles, gothic tropes, ‘perverse’ symmetry, “echoes and coincidences” (174). Because twins Gabriel and Michael both stand to inherit their family’s estate, the plot development of this novel represents a serious division within the model of primogeniture. With the family name Godkin, and first names from two of the most important archangels, they can be read as aspects of a single, conflict-ridden masculine subject, its ideal image fractured and seeking to regain the ‘grace’ of subjective unity (Gabriel’s role as narrator and the irony surrounding the inheritance plot is particularly appropriate given that his name is that of God’s chief messenger, and that he is considered patron saint of messengers). The plot surrounding their inheritance frames its ‘Irish themes’ through the divisions the brothers represent: Gabriel is associated with Anglo-Irish land-owners and Michael with a rebellious peasantry, they mirror the divide between Protestants and Catholics, and they also embody a more general distinction in Banville’s *oeuvre* between writing or theorising about a romantic ideal and direct action to effect social change (the opposition between idealised theory and violent action may recall the meeting between Copernicus and Albrecht earlier in this chapter). In this way, the split within masculine subjectivity in the form of a ‘doubled’ inheritance forms the prototype for a collection of social schisms.

The gothic trope of the doppelganger has been used to describe the relationship between Gabriel and Michael before (Imhof 1989:59; Lernout 72), but its significance in terms of masculinity has received little attention. When Gabriel looks back on the events he narrates, he imagines his “father is grinning in his grave at the notion of his paltry son fiddling with this, with *his*, baroque madhouse” (15; original emphasis). The family history is mysterious: four generations before our narrator Gabriel was born his namesake Gabriel Godkin, a man “touched with the magic of death and dreams” (16) acquired Birchwood from the Lawlesses, who were its traditional owners. He quickly establishes madness and perversion, “a fair conception gone awry” (33), as its mode of existence. Joseph, Gabriel’s father, carries a “muted but

savage anguish that hounded him all his life, and which, in order to live with it, he transformed into fury or passion, brooding melancholy, visible pain” (17). Joseph’s madness is shared by the rest of the ironically named Godkins: Granny Godkin dies by spontaneous combustion in a reference to Dickens’ *Bleak House*, another source for Banville’s play with the theme of inheritance, while Granda Godkin is found dead out in the woods, his “false teeth sunk to the gums like vicious twin pink parasites in the bark” (59). We soon learn that Gabriel’s mother Beatrice is not really his biological mother: twins Gabriel and Michael are the product of an incestuous relationship between siblings Joseph and Martha. Moreover, the twins are part of an elaborate deal designed to give the appearance of propriety and a single heir. Separated at birth, Gabriel would remain as the son of the house, while Michael would live elsewhere with Martha. In return, a swap would be made so that Michael would ultimately inherit the family’s land. However, in a cruel twist Joseph welches on the deal, leaving the estate to Gabriel alone. This array of madness and perversion problematises the notion of a direct line of inheritance, both in genetic and legal terms, while the same time neatly allegorising Ireland’s divisions of religion and class.

Despite Brian Donnelly’s assertion that “Birchwood is not *Castle Rackrent* in a twentieth-century pastiche,” suggesting instead that it provides “the necessary factual basis for his Beckett-like narrator’s feverish quest into the nature of his strange and inexplicable existence” (134), the importance of the tradition of primogeniture in dramatising Gabriel’s “feverish quest” clearly owes something to Maria Edgeworth’s landmark novel. *Castle Rackrent* (1800), both “the first Irish novel [and] the first Big House novel” (Kirkpatrick vii), was published at the time of the Act of Union and satirised the religious and class conflict between landlord and tenant. Incidentally, Edgeworth’s Catholic narrator, Thady Quirk, provides a name Banville uses later in *Eclipse* and as the name of the protagonist of his crime novels *Christine Falls* and *The Silver Swan*. Imhof also notes a similarity to *Castle Rackrent* in the way Gabriel announces his name at the opening of *Birchwood* (1989:64). In Edgeworth’s time, male identification with

and entrance to the patriarchal family and class systems was of great importance for Anglo-Irish rule, and was institutionalised in the law of primogeniture. Insofar as *Birchwood* is a parody of primogeniture and the ideal genetic continuity and superiority of male heirs that it represents, we might consider it to be Banville's *Castle Rackrent*. Nonetheless, Donnelly's point that the similar themes are subordinated to a novel primarily about subjectivity should not be forgotten.

When Gabriel leaves his home and sets out on a journey in which he joins the circus, he ostensibly begins a romantic quest to find his 'sister.' However, his twin sister "Rose" is a fiction suggested to him by his 'aunt' Martha, who wants to get rid of him so that Michael will inherit the estate; the fiction is further propagated by his own romantic imagination and in order to have an object to seek. This false quest is appropriate to counter-memory: the object of desire never existed anyway. His only piece of evidence for the existence of his 'sister' is a photograph "with a white crease aslant it like a bloodless vein . . . of a young girl dressed in white" (13). However, it does not lead him to historical facts but rather to the misrecognition or even destruction of the past: "I knew this girl was someone else, a lost child, misplaced in time, and when I returned the picture had inexplicably altered, and would not fit into the new scheme of things, and I destroyed it" (ibid.). Historical representation is subordinate to desire, but this desire is "bloodless," and reinforces Gabriel's feeling of "impotence" when trying to reconstruct his memories. He claims that memory does not access "things as they were", but instead "reconstruct a wholly illusory past" (12). However, his desire to narrate means that these doubts do not last long: contrary to Heraclitus, he claims he has "gone down twice to the same river" (11), and that a special access to the past will be possible.

The individual development associated with the *bildungsroman* is, in Gabriel's case, a futile quest undertaken, in part at least, to displace the uneasy reality that he and Michael are brothers and are the product of incest. Gabriel later admits that he needed to believe in the fiction of a sister "in order not to believe in *him*, my cold mad brother" (172; original emphasis),

in much the same way that Nicholas Copernicus is spurred to isolate himself in a world of ideas by his brother Andreas. Michael actively arranges the twists and turns of the plot that seem to make Gabriel a mere puppet of historical chaos: “Wherever I went he was ahead of me, dogging the steps I had not taken yet. He found the circus, and joined the Molly Maguires, brought them to fight the Lawlesses, and the circus to fight the Mollies” (174). Michael is thus a figure of otherness that is sublimated into (or misrecognised as) a female figure, but also the unconscious arranger of Gabriel’s journey. Particularly common in gothic writing, this splitting of masculine subjectivity into separate parts allows Banville to externalise the conflicts they represent, and to connect them with social and historical meanings. In this way, the question of inheritance dramatises the fundamental solipsism of *Birchwood*, whereby the male narrator struggles within himself to establish mastery over desire and a stable, essential subjective unity. The fiction of a ‘sister’ is finally shattered in the showdown when the Molly Maguires’ attack Birchwood house, which has been occupied once again by the Lawlesses. The Molly Maguires dress in women’s clothes (partly as disguise and partly as political statement), and Michael wears “a white gown” (167) and appears in the garden in an echo of the scene in Gabriel’s photograph, to emphasise that he is the real sibling, and to signal the ‘showdown’ between the perspectives they represent. Thus the conflict between Gabriel and Michael is dramatised most fully through the performance of gender difference, which also stands in for the reversal or upheaval of other social structures like class and religion.

There is a particular image that Gabriel singles out as enabling his memories to return and his writing to proceed. Remembering his sexual encounter with Mag while traveling with the circus, Gabriel states that it gave him “an abiding impression of the female as something like a kind of obese skeleton, a fine wire frame hung with pendulous fleshfruit, awkward, clumsy, frail in spite of its bulk, a motiveless wallowing juggernaut” (13-14). In this we recognise the separation of the elements of form and materiality that Butler and others understand as essential to the “body of reason” – the constructed other of a masculinist rationality. This



construction is recognisable in *The Newton Letter*, too, when the narrator describes Otilie undressing “to display not breast and bum and blonde lap, but her very innards, the fragile lungs, mauve nest of intestines, the gleaming ivory of bone, and her heart, passionately labouring” (30-31). For Gabriel, this image of an “obese skeleton” is connected with his memories of Birchwood house and the narrative power to bring the past back so that “the years were as nothing” (B 13). As he recalls fingering Mag, he confesses how he “discovered nooks and musty crannies, crevices which reminded me of nothing so much as the backwaters of the house where I had played as a child” (14). Thus, a combination of architectural form and a mute, penetrable female body becomes the enabling condition for Gabriel’s narrative. The female body stands for the materiality that threatens Gabriel and must be aestheticised, transformed into images of beauty. The house figures as a structure or form through which this aesthetic transformation becomes possible. The whole drama of inheritance, Gabriel’s quest and journeying with the circus, the class conflict and the subjective drama signified by the relationship between Gabriel and Michael, is ordered through this relation between mind or form and matter, and the often crude gender stereotypes that are deployed to enact it. Thus, Granny Godkin considers Joseph and Beatrice’s marriage a Lawless plot to take over Birchwood through the “tyranny of the cunt and its corollary, the womb” (17), and Gabriel’s powers of memory supposedly extend back to the womb and the origins of this drama in Joseph and Martha’s incest.

If the relation between narrative and the material events it transcribes is figured through the body, the male narrator’s repeated attempts to avoid the most threatening implications of sex and violence by idealising them are just as repeatedly demolished. During the course of his narrative Gabriel meets several women, but none equal the ideal image in the photograph of his ‘sister,’ and Gabriel is quick to point out that “I began my journey a virgin, and ended it still unsullied” (130). All of these female characters are constructed through the category of the material, and appear alternately as innocent beauties or as grotesque and disturbing to the

rational male subject. Rosie (whose name, of course, is a familiar form of Rose, the invented sister), Gabriel's first girlfriend, provides him with his earliest experience of female anatomy: "Our affair, then, was founded on mutual astonishment at the intricacy of things, my brain, her cunt, things like that" (68). This situation is the outcome of Gabriel's unlikely tactic of wooing Rosie by telling her about algebra, which distracts her long enough for him to reach a hand beneath her dress. Earlier Gabriel described this same event in terms of the disparity between his imagination and the reality that confronts him, admitting he is constantly surprised by

the difference between the way things are and the way, before I find them, I expect them to be. For example, the vagina I had imagined as a nice neat hole, situated at the front, rather like a second navel, but less murky, a bright sun to the navel's moon . . . Judge then of my surprise and some fright when . . . I fingered her furry damp secret and found not so much a hole as a wound. (13)

Gabriel's discovery registers the contrast between an idealist or mythological notion of sex and reproduction and an attitude towards sexuality as abject. The metaphor of sun and moon is suggestive of metaphysics, and the fictions of heavenly harmony in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* which also contrast an idealised masculine intellectualism with a threatening femininity.

The fact that Gabriel and Rosie meet at Cotter's place is significant too. The Big House has its 'other' in the form of the woods that surround Cotter's place—the former residence of a tenant who has been evicted from the Birchwood estate—and, indeed, Cotter's place itself. These woods are, Gabriel writes, "one of nature's cripples," full of trees that "grew wicked and deformed" and roots "thrust up again by the rock, queer maimed things" (31). In contrast to the vertical and linear form of Birchwood house and the "eponymous" upright birch trees on the hill, the trees where Gabriel likes to roam are horizontal and non-linear in form – they are not distinct but interconnected and "warring" for space with all the other trees and plants (ibid.). Anthropomorphic growths such as "lymphatic mushrooms" and "glandular blobs" show

that this “hideous, secretive and exciting place” (ibid.) stands in contrast to the formal purity of the upright trees and the house itself. It is in Cotter’s derelict hut that Gabriel sees his parents having sex, a discovery that is framed as an aesthetic revelation:

She cried out delicately under his thrusts, and, as I watched, a delicate arc of briar beside them, caught by a stray breeze, sprang up suddenly into the air, where two butterflies were gravely dancing . . . I had discovered something awful and exquisite, of immense, unshakeable calm. (32)

Gabriel tells how he felt a kind of harmony, and “recognized, in me all along, waiting, an empty place where I could put the most disparate things and they would hang together” (33). As in the scene where he likens the house to his sexual encounter with Mag, the power to narrate is predicated upon a transformation of sexuality into romantic, idealised imagery. This pattern of metaphor enables narrative to proceed, and is at the same time an authorisation of Gabriel’s sense of interiority. Most importantly, the fact that this sense is a compound of conflicting emotions, “awful and exquisite,” hints that the intuition of transcendence Gabriel describes here may be described as sublime.

The second section of *Birchwood*, devoted to Gabriel’s travels with the circus, is named “Air and Angels,” in reference to John Donne’s famous lyric of the same name in which a male speaker describes a woman and tries to come to terms with the relations between men and women. Achsah Guibbory characterises Donne’s complex poem as having a “‘before and after’ meditative structure” (105), that “explores the change in [a] lover’s perception of [a] woman and an emergent feeling of ‘disparitie’ (in several senses) in his relation with her” (106). The speaker’s changing attitude towards the woman in the poem is articulated through the distinction between an angel’s entirely spiritual existence and the body of air it takes on in order to appear to humans. While initially “associating [women] with the higher ‘masculine’ element of air rather than the ‘feminine’ earth and water . . . it still follows the Aristotelian identifica-

tion of woman with the material, physical realm, the world of the body, while placing man in the spiritual realm of angels" (110). The movement enacted in the poem, from seeing women as angels, and thus as perfect representatives of an ideal realm, to seeing them as air, which although close to the spiritual is constituted of matter, presents in miniature Gabriel's process of discovery in which his idealised notions of femininity are replaced by an alarming physical reality.

The second part of *Birchwood* is thus set up as the scene for Gabriel's changing perception of women. Of course, Banville is not nearly so gentle as to shift from the ideal to the adjacent realm of air. Instead, violence builds throughout this part of the novel and includes the death of several of the female characters. The circus Gabriel joins include a pair of twins, Ada and Ida, who, like Gabriel and Michael, signify opposing qualities: "[s]piritually they were as different as dark and light" (121). Ada is "sullen, given to incoherent rages, dark laughter, careless cruelty, yet one who, with her wanton ways, displayed a certain vicious splendour" (121-22). She is unsentimental and cold, and understands immediately that she must abandon baby Sophie when she cannot be found, in order that the troupe can escape the violence that is breaking out all around them. With her steel will and beautiful cruelty, Ada resembles nothing so much as the masochist's ideal woman. Ida, by contrast, is the "good" romantic ideal, embodying "childlike vision" (122) and a capricious delight in simple pleasures. When Ida is raped and killed by (British) soldiers, Gabriel is unmoved, describing it as part of the "grotesque logic of the times" (147), and suggesting that "the sacrifice of course was the slaughter of innocence" (ibid.). Yet he wonders callously if this is "too subtle, too neat?" (ibid.), just as, when Ida is dying, he informs Mario that "he was needed for a deathbed scene" (146). Ida's death is clearly the sacrifice of one version of femininity—the ideal innocent—leaving only Ada, the representative of cruelty.

The novel's *denouement*, the three-way battle between the Lawlesses, the Molly Maguires and the circus troupe (which Gabriel avoids by remaining hidden inside a caravan), culminates

in the death of Angel, one of the circus folk, which Gabriel tells in a magic realist style:

Angel began to swell, I cannot explain it, she filled the doorway until the posts groaned under the strain, and her massive trunk poured itself into every nook in the caravan, and soon the whole thing was packed with her, throbbing and heaving . . . her hands scrabbled furiously, scampering over her wound like animals. She shuddered and coughed, and all that shook, that flesh, fat, hair, teeth, blood and she died snarling and laughing. (164)

The word “nook” here recalls Gabriel’s layered memory of Mag and the “backwaters” of the house, but here we see not the compatibility of form and materiality through which Gabriel’s narrative powers were sanctioned, but the abjection of bodily excess, with references to threatening physical expansion and animality.

Like Gabriel, most of the men who appear in *Birchwood* avoid sex altogether, preferring an onanistic ideal. Michael, for instance, “had little interest in the sexual duet, being a confirmed soloist” (64), but being Catholic he tells Gabriel of the “implacable paradoxes” of religion and about a priest’s visit to his school:

He had a cross in his belt and he kept fiddling with it, I remember that, pulling at it. He said that if we did things to ourselves we’d be put into a special part of hell . . . ‘Do you know what I did? After school I had to burn the dustbins, out behind the camp.’ He sniggered. ‘I did it into the fire!’ (53)

Similarly, although Mario, a juggler and musician in the circus, has a child with Ada, Gabriel tells the reader that his “only love was his left hand” (121). As Mario puts it,

‘I fuckada woman one time, right?’ he said, chopping the air with the edge of his hand. ‘One time, no more, then she’sa mine, see? You know what I mean? I got her in my head,

alla them in here' – he tapped his forehead – 'and when I wanta the *real* woman, who do everything, you know? I just think about one and – ratta tat *tat!* See?' (121)

While these examples may be largely for comic effect, the fact that Banville includes such formulations of male desire as either hypocritical or honest masturbatory ideals suggests that this way of restricting desire to mental representations is part of the negative structure of masculinity which Banville's novels produce.

Sage suggests that there is an echo of Donne's poem in *The Newton Letter*, too: Otilie's sense that the Newton historian is unreal, "just a voice, a name" (NL 67), seems to reverse the bodily incarnation of Donne's "Aire and Angels" (Sage 32) and make the narrator himself insubstantial. Instead of a man addressing an "angel" or ideal image, however, Banville sets up a trio, or triangular relationship that contrasts by now familiar types of femininity: Charlotte is slender, fine-boned, dark-haired and 'mysterious' while Otilie is large, voluptuous, blonde and 'ordinary.' The work of Ruth Frehner and Patricia Coughlan on these triangular structures and female types has been invaluable. Unlike Newton, who accused Locke of trying "to embroil him with women" (6) and is reputed to have remained a virgin his whole life, Banville's historian is very much involved with women, and therefore must come to terms with the 'condition' Banville creates that the female other be figured through a binary structure corresponding to the mind/body distinction. *The Newton Letter* sets up a triangular relationship between the male narrator and two women, Charlotte and Otilie, each of whom represent one side of that dichotomy. The narrator sleeps with Otilie simply because she is willing, but he tries to convince himself that it is Charlotte he loves; he even describes this ménage-a-trois as a combination of the two – "Charlottilie" (57).

The running irony is that Charlotte is always absent, in more ways than one, yet she is described as a presence. The narrator cannot adequately describe her; at one time he considers the force of her presence to be impossible to present in language: "Such words don't exist. They would need to be no more than forms of intent, balanced on the brink of saying,

another version of silence. Every mention I make of her is a failure" (52). Like the Wittgensteinian silence with which Gabriel ended *Birchwood*, this maintains a negative relation to the metaphysical ideal of truth and presence that is the basis of the narrator's (and Newton's) crisis. Eventually we see that the narrator's idealisation of Charlotte is based on the assumption that Edward mistreats her, and on his view of her as a stoic remainder of Anglo-Irish gentility, whose aloof manner signals a noble embodiment of her class. As my earlier discussion suggests, both assumptions stem from the narrator's attempts to take to patriarchal authority to task, which result in him re-projecting many of the values he tries to critique. In this way, the crisis of representation and the turn away from history are further entrenched by the Newton historian's placing of Charlotte on an aestheticised, angelic pedestal.

The narrator's relationship with Ottilie seems to offer him the opposite of Charlotte's beautiful ideal. Because this close sexual relationship brings the narrator in contact with Ottilie's body and his own senses, he finds it threatening as well:

Sometimes this frenzied sorcery of the senses frightened me. Squatting before her with my face in her lap, staring in silent fascination at the brownish frills and violet-tinted folds of her sex, I would suddenly feel something blundering away from me, an almost-creature of our making, damaged and in pain, dragging a blackened limb along the floor and screaming softly. It was an image of guilt, of my shame and her desperation, the simple fear that she would get pregnant, and of things too more deeply buried. Its counterpart, light to that dark, was the pale presence of a third always with us, who was my private conjuring trick. (62-3)

This horrible image, and its antidote in the form of Charlotte's "pale presence," presents the basis of the narrator's moral development in *The Newton Letter*. If he is to really engage in the everyday world that he now sees as holding important truths for him, he must overcome the negative associations of sex and sensuality. The risk, which I argue is never quite dispelled, is

that this “almost-creature” of fear and suffering is a way of reinforcing the sublimation of desire into its idealised, non-corporeal form. By the end of the novel, the narrator’s “large lesson” (23) has been revealed to him, and the agony of the above passage is calmed in an acceptance that Otilie is pregnant with their child. However, the novel does not provide a ‘complete’ resolution, since the narrator learns the news while away working in the icy north, which, as I suggested earlier, is a scene of sublime masculine isolation and struggle that Banville refers to in a number of his works. Moreover, the Newton historian imagines his return to Ferns to “set up house, fulfil some grand design . . . become a nurseryman and wear tweeds” (96-97) thus taking Edward’s place when he passes away. Another possible continuation of his earlier ‘ascendency’ fantasy is the fact that he assumes the child will be a boy (97). Finally, the comment that “I am pregnant myself, in a way. Supernumerous existence wells up in my heart” (95), while seeming to announce love and acceptance, should perhaps warn us of the ongoing role of gender difference in the narrator’s aesthetic imagination. This quote from Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* forms the conclusion to the narrator’s dilemmas, but, as I discuss in more than one place in this thesis, Banville frequently figures masculine creative powers as pregnancy only to find that the others framed in this way become mere ghosts or figures of his imagination, rather than the real, material beings he thought they were.

Similar issues are at stake in Newton’s own epiphany of “supernumerous existence” – a phrase that is curiously indicative of the sublime, since it could either refer to a world beyond counting of ungeneralisable material differences, or to a “supersensible,” infinitely expanded notion of counting that might ‘master’ reality through counting and categorisation. The Newton historian’s turn away from a history of facts and Newton’s own intellectual crisis (as Banville represents it) seem to be linked by common rejection of the abstract and an embrace of everyday, empirical realities. He describes this turn in the following way:

But would you believe that all this, the Popovian Newton-as-the-greatest-scientist-the-world-has-known, now makes me feel slightly sick? Not that I think any of it untrue, in



the sense that it is fact. It's just that another kind of truth has come to seem to me more urgent, although, *for the mind*, it is nothing compared to the lofty verities of science. Newton himself, I believe, saw *something of the matter* in that strange summer of 1693. (26; emphasis added)

This juxtaposition of mind and matter in the narrator's explanation of his feelings is carefully constructed. The truth both he and Newton seem to have experienced is nothing "for the mind". This truth is best described as aesthetic, since it involves the body too. It makes the narrator queasy because of "the sense that it is fact" – a phrase which might be construed as opposed to an idealist, non-sensory cognition of facts despite its apparent affirmation of the reverse. Following this passage, the word "nothing" appears twice (27), both times in italics for emphasis. When Newton is asked what has been lost in the fire, his "mouth opens and a word like a stone falls out. *Nothing*" (27). The narrator speculates that Newton had, in a way, already lost his life's work, because he had become dissatisfied with the abstract knowledge of science and was increasingly interested in biblical exegesis and the occult:

The fire, or whatever the real conflagration was, had shown him something terrible and lovely, like flame itself. *Nothing*. The word reverberates. He broods on it as on some magic emblem whose other face is not to be seen and yet is emphatically there. For the nothing automatically signifies the everything. (27; original emphasis)

These passages contrast the sublime image of flame ("terrible and lovely"), which the narrator suggests is a metaphor for Newton's internal "conflagration" of values, with the dumb materiality of stone. There is also an echo here of the novel's epigraph ("a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary"), and thus with the comparison it sets up between the 'distraction' or seduction of the senses and the supersensible truth of ideas. In any case, the contrast functions through the structure of the sublime, as signaled by the relation between nothing

and everything; the negation of signs here does not eliminate their effect, but redoubles their potential to supply meaning as a transcendent ‘presence.’

Although *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* seem more obviously to be ‘historical’ fictions, it is in *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* that problems of historical representation are most interesting because these novels flirt with a specifically Irish setting. Although both novels are highly metafictional in their approach to historical setting and context, the argument that this produces a critique of historical realisms and the ideology of the nation-state with which it is often connected, is problematic. This chapter has argued that the counter-memorial perspective produces a relation to the past that is fluid and that is defined through the always-impossible desire for presence and in idealised subjectivity. Banville exploits this mode of writing continuously, using it to demonstrate how his protagonists’ negation of a stable historicity supports their continued aestheticisation of experience and identity. The links between this subjective drama within masculinity and the backdrop of Irish history and politics is, I suggest, a means of showing the inevitable failure of the protagonist in terms that also implicate critical accounts of patriarchal and colonial power in Ireland’s history. Another key dimension to the relationship between masculinity and historical narrative involves Banville’s use of narrative patterns that assert the sublimation and ‘return’ of the body—or rather of a notion of dangerous materiality—that threatens the ideal autonomous images of masculine subjectivity. Banville places his protagonists in ironic confrontations with this dangerous materiality, which is always figured as an ‘undisciplined’ feminine quality. However, I suggest that this confrontation, even when it is momentarily resolved as a positive affirmation of identity, remains primarily about the masculine subject’s relation to writing and continues to be a source of an “awful and exquisite” (B 32) inspiration, a conflict structured by the sublime that provides these stories of powerless and self-deluded masculinity with their power to survive.

## Chapter 4

# (An)aesthetic Education: Dis-figuring the Masculine Subject in *Mefisto*

*Moreover, he believed that even this last fragment of consciousness could be removed from the marionettes, that their dance could be transported entirely into the realm of mechanical forces...<sup>1</sup>*

Like Kleist's advocate of the *marionettentheatre*, the narrator of *Mefisto* believes in the possibility of rationalising and mastering the body and its chaotic environment. Banville's highly patterned sixth novel concludes the science tetralogy by further intensifying the distinction established in *Doctor Copernicus* whereby a rational abstract order is opposed to consciousness and sensuous experience. Like Banville's earlier novels, *Mefisto* demonstrates the impossibility or untenability of achieving rational mastery over the material world and over representation, but does so in a way that tends to re-affirm the desire for these goals. And, as with the novels discussed so far, this desire is co-ordinated primarily through representations of gender. Far

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Theatre of Marionettes," trans. Dorothea Franck, *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*, eds. Caroline A. van Eck, James W. McAllister and Renée van de Vall. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 236.

from a critique of epistemological and representational ideals, the story of Gabriel Swan's impossible quest is therefore a re-investment in the formal idealism that sustains the masculine subject in Banville's fiction.

This chapter will focus on two aspects of the theme of disfigurement, drawing on the figures presented by Rosi Braidotti in "Mothers, Monsters, Machines" (1997) for much of its organisation and inspiration. First, I address the first two of these figures by discussing representations of the body in *Mefisto*, focusing on the ways femininity is presented as an ideal or abject otherness against which masculine subjectivity is defined. Gabriel's reinforcement of this binary scheme prepares for his injuries in the fire that takes place in the interstice, as it were, between the two parts of the text. This dramatic event marks his body and subjects him to constant pain. However, I read this as a disavowal of power that serves to reinforce his sublime sense of a supersensible rationality behind the apparent chaos of the world. The second part of the chapter will not discuss Braidotti's third topic, machines, but alters course and uses Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the face as an "abstract machine" in order to show how masculine subjectivity is dramatised in *Mefisto* specifically through the marking of the face. In doing so, I observe the coercive, regulatory aspect of what Deleuze and Guattari term the system of "faciality," and link this to the consolidation and intensification of a binary structure of masculine subjectivity regulated by the logic of the sublime in *Mefisto*.

#### 4.1 Mothers and Monsters

Gabriel seeks to understand his existence through mathematics; by the end of the narrative this develops into a mathematics associated with the sublime: “[t]hen suddenly I was outside in the cold black glossy night, under an amazement of stars . . . And all at once I saw again clearly the secret I had lost sight of for so long, that chaos is nothing but an infinite number of ordered things” (183). This is not exactly a ‘mathematical sublime’ in the Kantian sense, but alludes to the presentation of something unpresentable (because infinite) through the mathematics of fractals and chaos theory (Heaney 367-8). At the same time, the novel is self-reflexively aware of its interest in sublime aesthetics. In the scene in which Felix and Gabriel go tramping in the hills, not long after the epiphany quoted above, Felix makes a direct—if tongue in cheek—reference to Caspar David Friedrich’s landscapes (225), which, with their abyssal depths and distances and often obscure atmospheres, are evocative of the sublime. Even the description of Felix “wearing his plus-fours and his cap, and carr[ying] a tall spiked stick” (225) exudes a mock-Romantic sensibility that seems to parody the iconic figure of Friedrich’s *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Mists* (1818).

For the most part, however, the emphasis of the mathematical theme is on binary oppositions, and the idealist-materialist axis with which they seem to be primarily concerned. Regarding the “secret” of chaos that Gabriel describes above, Elke D’hoker argues that “the truth revealed transcends the material reality through which it manifests itself, in that it is concerned with the super-sensible—though rational—realm of order and harmony” (D’hoker 2000:38-9). Although I disagree with the overall interpretation in which this comment is embedded, her statement is clearly definitive of the sublime dynamic at work here. Transcending materiality is Gabriel’s key aim; the dialectical structure of conceptual oppositions such as mind-body, presence-absence, or male-female, provides the medium in which he can assert his

desire for an ideal, abstract order prior, or superior to, phenomenal appearances. Gabriel believes in the possibility of an entirely rational and systematic transcendence of material reality, and commits himself to achieving it despite his repeated failure. But instead of a transcendence of the material, the novel focuses more intensely on Gabriel's body; as Žižek writes of Hegel's 'infinite judgment,' the effect of the sublime is

not in the dialectical mediation-sublimation of all contingent, empirical reality, not in the deduction of all reality from the mediating movement of absolute negativity, but in the fact that this very negativity, to attain its 'being-for-itself,' must embody itself again in some miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftover (Žižek 1989:207)

This ineluctable return to the body characterises every transcendental formulation that Gabriel attempts to make, and provides the novel with its central event. However, Gabriel's disfigurement is prepared for in his discovery of mathematics and in the various ways his attempts to shore up a masculine "body of reason" (Butler) by narrating others to be the body.

Conventionally, masculinity has been shaped and defined by oppositions such as those mentioned above; it has always defined itself as "one," a unity extracted from surrounding disorder. Luce Irigaray has noted "the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything, to number everything by units" (1997:251). Likewise, numbers offer an ideal abstract world in which laws are certain and binding, and contingency (especially the contingency of living in a physical body) can be offset by understanding the world through an *a priori* set of rules. This aspect of cultural history leads directly to the argument I will make here: that the gender politics of *Mefisto* are structured through counting and dis-counting bodies and figures as apposite to (or excluded from) the project of masculine subjectivity. The resistance of matter to transcendence is brought to the service of a sublime task: as Gabriel's failure to "count everything" progresses, the failure and renunciation serve to make his belief in "counting" stronger. This simultaneously defines the masochistic character of the novel: the

male narrator fails to constitute an entirely rationalised, symbolically coherent subjectivity, thereby using failure and suffering as a means to reconstitute the very idealism he purports to reject.

Gabriel sets his narrative in a vaguely Irish world where he drifts between various institutions—notably the Big House where his family were once tenants—fleshed out with many of the conventional elements of gothic fiction and in which Faustian forms of will and desire tempt him. Victor Sage has analysed some of these gothic elements under the rubric of “petrification” – the “aesthetic celebration of decay” (28) that pervades the houses and environs of Banville’s fiction and is structured by an “ambivalent, liminal moment [that] is a primal scene . . . rich in psychological, but also cultural meaning” (29). This ambivalence, he writes, produces “a critical estrangement between the present and the past” (36), an excavation of the gaps in material and historical identities.

Apart from Sage’s observation that this ambivalence is organised around a male point of view (29), little attention has been given to the “strange petrifications” (34) of the body and sexuality associated with these gothic spaces, or to the gender politics they imply. Importantly, however, Sage reads Banville’s gothicism as a generic choice for representing the conflicts of an Irish historical consciousness, laying the ground to understand the anxiety surrounding revisions of gender roles in similar terms. If, as critics have suggested, the gothic arises from a sense of historical schism and a nostalgia for the comforts of “logocentric history” (Mogen, Sanders and Karpinsky 16), it seems plausible to think that the strong associations between femininity and strange gothic spaces in Banville’s fiction arise through the complementarity of the historical legacies of patriarchy and colonialism. The extent to which these “moments of the sublime, raised and cancelled in the structural metaphor of petrification” (Sage 36) can provide “critical” (ibid.) perspectives on this past seems questionable when we consider how the tension between historicism and aestheticism is framed in Banville’s presentation of gender and the body.

Donna Heiland has shown that “patriarchy is not only the subject of gothic novels, but is itself a gothic structure” (10-11). Indeed, she suggests that classic gothic fiction can be read as the synthesis of a masculinist politics with aesthetic experience through “a movement between the sublime and the beautiful, and between the masculinized and feminized forms of power that they represent” (36). The sublime is a key structure in both aesthetics and gender politics, and one that has a particular affinity with the gothic genre because it too negotiates a relationship with transgression or excess. Yet the projections, distortions or splittings of masculine subjectivity that occur in the gothic may have little to do with the external real, the Other, or with true self-division, but may instead constitute an intra-psychic ‘struggle’ that recuperates a superficially lost sense of mastery or autonomy. As in Burke’s and Kant’s accounts of the sublime, overwhelming experience or subjugation may ultimately function as means of ordering and rationalising the self.

The set of ideas explored through the notion of “figuration” by Rosi Braidotti in “Mothers, Monsters, Machines” (1997) provides a useful starting point for analysing *Mefisto*’s representation of the alterity of the body.<sup>2</sup> Braidotti’s non-dualistic perspective on the subject of scientific rationality allows her to explore the ways this subject is socially constructed and the connections between her group of figures in order to understand subjectivity and difference apart from the hegemony of established binary oppositions that reproduce patriarchal relations. These connections are both thematically and methodologically relevant to a discussion of the masculine subject in *Mefisto*. Braidotti argues that conventional accounts of difference in Western philosophical and scientific traditions have constructed gender according to a binary system that devalues and subtly “abnormalises” the female body. Something like Braidotti’s set

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<sup>2</sup> Braidotti defines “figurations” as “ways of expressing feminist forms of knowledge that are not caught in a mimetic relationship to dominant scientific discourse” (59). This “nomadic” subject position, exploring new figures that inhabit rather than repress multiple relationships of difference, is clearly different from the masochistic “total subject” (Mansfield), which maintains (even as it reverses or contradicts) mimetic dualisms, rather than escaping them. See Rosi Braidotti, “Mothers, Monsters, Machines,” *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 59-79.



of figures is clearly at work in *Mefisto*, but I will argue that they tend to preserve the dualistic assumptions they embody rather than re-think them as Braidotti seeks to do.

Banville's novel does not provide a critique of traditional binary concepts (nature/culture, matter/mind, female/male etc) leading to a "re-figuring" of gender identities. Rather, I will argue that the burns that "disfigure" and mark Gabriel's face and body at the end of Part I, while appearing to expel him from the dominant cultural position he had previously occupied in fact consolidate his power by representing it as diminished. This is masochistic because it reproduces power by representing it as loss; it works to intensify the binary logic or code by which figuration might proceed (in the terms of his narrative self-performance), rather than embracing difference positively as Braidotti's point of view attempts. The process of this expulsion—or, more precisely, this immersion in the material and the signifiers of the disfigured and disqualified—is marked on the body itself. Through the ideal-material axis, the masochistic subject can act as both protagonist and antagonist, in much the same way as Sacher-Masoch's characters propagate a "dominant other" to embody their own desires; ultimately this subjection is an expansion of the self, an organisation of signs that control the self through performing its loss of control. Banville produces something similar through the marking of his protagonist's bodies and the symmetrical arrangements of other bodies and genders throughout the text. In *Mefisto*, bodies are imagined either as marionettes or angels, as hermetic mysteries or epiphanic dreamers.

From the outset of *Mefisto* Gabriel is immersed in a binary world, a place conditioned by chance and full of dangers to the idealised masculine subject. The first words of the novel, "Chance was in the beginning" (3), emphasise the tension between contingency and patriarchal teleology. Furthermore, Gabriel's conception and birth are figured as violent, masculine events through reference to Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan."<sup>3</sup> Later in this opening para-

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<sup>3</sup> "A shudder in the loins engenders there/The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead". See William Butler Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992) 260.

graph, Gabriel refers to himself as one “who only is escaped alone”(3), echoing the words of the servants of Job who come to tell their master of the destruction of his livestock, house and children (Job 1:13-18). The individual is portrayed as a puppet, purportedly powerless and subjected to unfathomable higher powers. This idea is developed further in the central imagery of the marionette theater. Berensmeyer (2000) rightly identifies the importance of Kleist’s essay “On The Theatre of Marionettes” to Banville’s fiction; the essay is a meditation on human form and consciousness that suggests gracefulness “appears in its purest form in the human body either when it has no consciousness at all or when it has an infinite one: that is, either in a puppet or in a god” (Kleist 240). This kind of dualism is apparent everywhere in *Mefisto*. Moreover, Kleist’s description of an idealised, unconscious state of formal perfection actually echoes the masochistic drama that occurs in *Mefisto*. If we consider Gabriel a marionette whose self-consciousness has rendered him ‘fallen’ from the state of grace achieved by unconscious things in the way Kleist’s parables describe, then it is precisely this ‘fall’ and the grievous scarring of his body that allows him to be ‘re-constructed’ and emerge as the “new man” ultimately produced by masochism.

There is a good deal of ambiguity surrounding the roles and powers of men in Gabriel’s world. Where concrete male characters appear, they are usually figured as silence or absence. For instance, Gabriel notes that his father’s “silences, into which a remark about the weather or a threat of death would drop alike without trace, were a force in our house” (13). Yet men seem to have control of the family history and the gene pool; of his grandmothers, Gabriel writes: “They must have had some effect, must have contributed a gene or two, yet there remains almost nothing of them. In the matter of heredity they were no match for their men-folk” (12). Nonetheless these women are significant in Gabriel’s memory. The death of one or other grandmother isolates another pattern found throughout Banville’s fiction – that women are never real, only symbolic: “I was not thinking of the living woman, she had been of scant significance to me. In death, however, she had become one with those secret touchstones

the thought of which comforted and mysteriously sustained me: small lost animals, the picturesque poor, warnings of gales at sea, the naked feet of Franciscans" (13). The maternal body is reduced to an object of only negative significance – that is, as one of the many images of pathos by which birth and death are translated into a formal, masculine order.

Braidotti sees the difference of monstrous or deviant bodies as paradigmatic for understanding the difference of women from men within the framework of scientific rationality. This is primarily connected to the idea of female bodily form as "morphologically dubious" (64) in contrast to the supposedly normative and stable male.<sup>4</sup> "Woman/mother" becomes monstrous both by excess and by lack, according to Braidotti: "through her identification with the feminine she is monstrous by displacement: as sign of the inbetween areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed, woman/mother is subjected to a constant process of metaphorization as "other-than"" (66-67). Against the background of the science tetralogy, this production of a monstrous or chaotic 'outside' is a crucial mode of characterisation. It arises in *Mefisto* when Gabriel's mother's pregnancy is described: "Her condition did not so much change as produce another person. Her ankles swelled, her hips thickened. Even her shoulders seemed broader, packed with soft flesh. She began to wear her hair pulled back in two tight, gleaming black wings and tied at the nape in a netted bun" (4). The angelic is, as so often in Banville's work, closely related to what Julia Kristeva has described as the abject.

As a morphing or penetrable body, this figure of the monster is similar to Kristeva's formulation in *Powers of Horror* (1982) of the concept of abjection as that which "I permanently thrust aside in order to live . . . the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be" (3). The monstrous demonstrates the dissolution and reinstitution of boundaries simultaneously, since it is always the marginal or deviant bodies that define the normative. Kristeva's "abject" denotes an excessive or unfaceable material reality, not of ob-

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<sup>4</sup> Braidotti notes the similar shape change involved in erection and pregnancy, but argues against "a sense of (false) anatomical complementarity between the sexes that contrasts with the complexity of the psychic representations of sexual difference" (65).

jects, but a substratum of pre-objects whose only quality is “that of being opposed to *I*” (1; original emphasis). Moreover, the abject is associated with the maternal and mortality; in her analysis of Céline, Kristeva suggests that the maternal is seen as two-faced because it engenders a limited, death-bound existence. The notion of the maternal is therefore an origin of writing because it inspires attempts to restore the infinite.<sup>5</sup> The theories of both Kristeva and Braidotti are clearly linked in very basic ways to the underlying continuity between materiality and the maternal going back to Irigaray’s readings of Plato.

Returning to this theme in *Mefisto*, we see that Gabriel’s description of his mother’s pregnancy seems to focus on the abject lurking in childbirth:

The burden she carries under her heart weighs on her like a weight of sadness. She had not asked for this outlandish visitation. She begins to feel a secret revulsion. Blood, torn flesh, the gaping lips of a cut before the seepage starts. Such things have always appalled her. In the butcher’s shop she cannot look at the strung-up waxen flanks of meat surreptitiously dripping pink syrup on the sawdust floor. She feels like a walking bruise, fevered and tumescent. Certain smells sicken her, of cooked cabbage, coal tar, leather. Images lodge in her head, anything will do, a cracked egg, a soiled dishrag, as if her mind is desperate for things with which to torment her. (5)

The whole section of “Marionettes” constantly refers back to such images as both horrifying and fascinating. For instance, Gabriel more than once mentions the hazards of birth in terms of the danger that one might not be completely individuated. Because of his dead twin, this danger is keenly felt: “The perils we had missed were many. We might have been siamese. One

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, in “Females Who Can Wreck the Infinite”, Kristeva notes the following: “Giving life—snatching life away: the Célinian mother is Janus-faced, she married beauty and death. She is a condition of writing, for life given without infinity aspires to find its supplement of lacework within words” (161). Mortal life, falling short of the ideal of the infinite, belongs to the mother, and it is writing which supplements and moves that life towards the infinite. Kristeva also links the abject with the sublime and with perverse writing which “establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss” (16).

of us might have exsanguinated into the other's circulation. Or we might simply have strangled one another. All this we escaped, and surfaced at last, gasping. I came first. My brother was a poor second. Spent swimmer, he drowned in air" (8). As in *Birchwood*, the absence of a twin inspires a quest to regain the symmetry or wholeness that has been lost. However, the subjective division felt by the later Gabriel is made more subtle by the fact that his twin is totally absent. Nonetheless, they struggle to be conceived and to be born; like the exhausted armies in the opening of *Macbeth* they are "[a]s two spent swimmers that do cling together/And choke their art" (I.ii.8-9). Throughout his narrative, Gabriel records a feeling of "being shared" (*M* 18), divided or haunted; he never shakes off "that interloper standing up inside me, sharing in secret this pillar of frail flesh and pain" (197).

Masculine subjectivity is represented in the novel in relation to the maternal/monstrous 'other' not in order to transcend or sublate the unequal terms of this conceptualisation of gender (as it might purport to do), but in order to identify with it as a negated or degraded subject position. There is an equivocality surrounding the clichéd twin motif; that is, Gabriel's descriptions of the physical mishaps that might have befallen himself and his twin become a sign of both his obsession with wholeness—solitary and wholly separate identity—and his obscure desire to experience plurality or being "not-one." Feeling both possessed by and lacking something, Gabriel notes that

Sometimes this sense of being burdened, of being somehow imposed upon, gave way to a vague and seemingly objectless yearning. One wet afternoon, at the home of a friend of my mother's who was a midwife, I got my hands on a manual of obstetrics which I pored over hotly for five tingling minutes, quaking in excitement and fear at all this amazing new knowledge. It was not, however, the gynaecological surprises that held me, slack-jawed and softly panting, as if I had stumbled on the most entrancing erotica, but that section of glossy, rubenesque colour plates depicting some of mother nature's more lavish mistakes, the scrambled blastomeres, the androgynes welded at hip or breast, the

bicipitous monsters with tiny webbed hands and cloven spines, all those queer, inseverable things among which I and my phantom brother might have been one more.

It seems out of all this somehow that my gift for numbers grew. From the beginning, I suppose, I was obsessed by the mystery of the unit, and everything else followed. Even yet I cannot see a one and a zero juxtaposed without feeling deep within me the vibration of a dark, answering note. (18)

“Inseverable” seems to be a key word here. Mother nature makes monstrous mistakes, bungled attempts at individuation such as God the father presumably would never allow. In *Mefisto*, Banville portrays such ‘mistakes’ and disfigurements as a kind of erotica for the obsessively formalist mind. Gabriel has a simultaneous fear of and desire for embodiment with its associated mortality, fluidity and contingency. This recalls Butler’s analysis of the masculine “body of reason” as a dematerialised self-image, but one that is reliant on the materiality it disavows.

The idea of severable identity, independent of maternal influence (and multiplicity) also resonates with references *Mefisto* makes to the creation of Homunculus in Goethe’s *Faust*.<sup>6</sup> In that drama, Wagner discovers a way to create life, allowing him to “play god” simply by mixing the correct chemical ingredients in a glass bottle. This hallmark of the Gothic tradition, the male ‘creation’ of life, is also a feature of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In her reading of *Frankenstein*, Frances Ferguson suggests that Victor Frankenstein “dreamed of a generation that would proceed ideally and formally, without being founded on the social induction . . . [but] having created an individual detachable from society, thus, discovers that individual to be monstrous” (107). Both these gothic ‘creatures’ are sources for *Mefisto*’s presentation of an unstable masculinity, as well as the need for masculinity to re-invent itself by technological means.

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<sup>6</sup> Imhof’s summary of the parallels between *Mefisto* and *Faust* is the best available (1989:160-65). He compares the creation of Homunculus in the laboratory to Kosok’s underground computer lab in the second part of *Mefisto*, suggesting that the “computer like Homunculus represents pure mind” (160). See also Braidotti’s discussion, 70-71.

However, while the fetus-like homunculus seems to arise from an ideal of masculine self-creation, its origin is a womb substitute (unlike Frankenstein's monster, whose parts are scavenged from bodies of the dead and subsequently re-animated). At the beginning of *Mefisto*, Gabriel indicates that it is the homunculus that fascinates him. He has twins among his ancestors, and writes that it is a "[p]lity they weren't bottled, I could have them for a mascot, my translucent little grand-uncles, fists clenched, frowning in their fluid" (3). Gabriel's interest in birth defects and deformities also supports the link to maternal birth. He also muses on the ghostly other inside him in terms that reinforce how "this other self seemed about to crack [him] open and step forth, pristine and pitiless as an imago" (31). Gabriel's concern is not just with detachability from the multiple claims of social identity (as in Ferguson's reading of *Frankenstein*), but also with the creation of a space separate from the maternal in which birth can occur as a formal ideal. Such masculine self-creation aims to produce an image not subject to change as the body is – a hermetically sealed envelope or surface that can avoid mutability and indeterminacy, and fortify itself within an illusory figuration of ordered unity.

The pair of female characters Gabriel falls in love (or in lust) with are also crucial in terms of the way femininity is alternately idealised and made abject. In some ways similar to the character of Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, (though with less opportunity for their own self-development or learning), they are a kind of foil for Gabriel's exploration of sexuality and his aspirations to symbolic mastery. Far from being "characters" in their own right, they are reflections of Gabriel's need to present the body in mutually exclusive terms, as either transcendent or degraded. Sophie, a deaf-mute, is described as someone who is outside of language and yet expressive; she embodies perception prior to linguistic appropriation, seeming to Gabriel like a "sealed vessel, precarious, volatile, filled to bursting with all there was to say. She might have been not mute but merely waiting, holding her breath" (55). Perhaps recalling the distinction in *Doctor Copernicus* between what can be 'said' and what can be 'shown,' Gabriel describes how "[s]he communicated in an airy, insubstantial language consisting not

of words but moving forms, transparent, yet precise and sharp, like glass shapes in air” (ibid.). The hermeticism applied to her is identical to that of Banville’s scientists’ world-systems and to the images (paintings, photographs) of women so central in many of his novels. However, Sophie is also desirably corporeal, and therefore resistant to Gabriel’s systematic, formalistic approach to life: “She would not solve. There was a flaw in her, a tiny imbalance, that would not let the equation come out” (54-55).

The fact that Sophie cannot be reduced to a system of numbers is related to her status as an unattainable object of desire. There is something that cannot be rationalised in Sophie. She is Gabriel’s projected need for a mysterious symbol, self-contained and filled with all the potential meaning he seeks to possess through mathematics. Unlike Rosie in *Birchwood*, she cannot be tricked into letting her guard down with a mere explanation of algebra. While their relationship is never a sexual one, there are sexually suggestive descriptions throughout Part I, such as in the two following passages:

I can still see it, that scene, the shiny arm of the gramophone, curved and fat like the arm of a baby, and the chrome nipple twinkling at the centre of the turntable, and Sophie’s slender hands lifting the record. (47)

[...]

Sophie sat on her heels on the bed, with the mouse in her lap, stroking it rhythmically with her fingertip, from head to tail, pressing a groove into the fine fur. At each gently dragging stroke the pink cleft at the tip of the creature’s sharp little snout opened a fraction and closed again wetly. Sophie bowed her head, her dark hair falling about her face. Her fingernail, gliding amid the parted fur, gleamed like an oiled bead . . . The mouse lay meekly in her lap, minutely throbbing. I took a step forward, it seemed a kind of lurching fall, and it sprang from her lap and scurried down the side of the bed. (65)



The sexual subtext to such descriptions of Sophie suggest Gabriel's sexual desire and his desire to understand the silent symbolic forms she withholds are much the same thing. The purpose of characterising her as 'mysterious' and outside language is to position her as an unrepresentable entity upon which the rational masculine subject can make its attempts to know. The mouse as a stand-in for the sexual body recalls Butler's analysis of the masculine subject in Western culture as a subject which requires the Other to be the body it has disavowed. Gabriel's desire for physical pleasure is displaced onto the descriptions of the mouse and the record player in order to maintain his ideal of Sophie as emblematic of some non-corporeal, ultimate meaning. Felix's exclamation—"look, beauty and the beast!" (65)—serves to emphasise the dichotomy set up here as well as to foreshadow Gabriel's disfigurement later in the novel.

If Sophie and Adele represent the sexualised aspect of Gabriel's concern with penetrating and crossing between inside and outside, Felix, in his role as Mephistopheles, is constantly urging Gabriel to discover the depths of things, or their underlying order. This is the same sublime task taken up by Copernicus and Kepler, and in the same way as those earlier novels, *Mefisto* is structured around its impossibility. Gabriel's desire for Sophie continues to be articulated at the level of surface and image, rather than achieving the penetration into "depth" and meaning he wants. On at least one occasion, this frustration is presented through a masochistic power structure. In the scene where Felix and Sophie collude to 'trap' Gabriel in the old wedding dress Sophie finds, the self-other logic of indifference is at work. Felix presides over a mock wedding, and Gabriel records that he

ventured forward unsteadily in the spindly shoes, my calves atremble. I felt hot and giddy. A spasm of excitement rose in me that was part pleasure and part disgust. It was as if inside this gown there was not myself but someone else, some other flesh, pliable, yielding, utterly at my mercy. Each trembling step I took was like the fitful writhing of a captive whom I held pressed tightly to my pitiless heart. I caught my reflection in a cracked bit of mirror on the wall, and for a second someone else looked out at me, dazed

and crazily grinning, from behind my own face. (83)

Here Gabriel enacts the subjection of himself, and in doing so becomes both the subject and object of this ‘forced’ cross-dressing. The clichéd metaphor of the cracked mirror even appears to register the sense of division that this cross-signifying brings to Gabriel. By wearing the wedding gown he covers his body symbolically as an idealised, virginal bride. This self-subjection is masochistic in structure, because Gabriel imagines himself as both the subject and object of the “fitful writhing.” He imagines himself as his own captive, trapped in the wrong gender role. The simultaneous pleasure and disgust is also characteristic, and exemplifies the role of the body – since the body thus costumed becomes “some other flesh, pliable, yielding, utterly at my mercy.” The imposition of an otherness upon the self here is therefore a performance of powerlessness.

The bodily surface or limit that is idealised and self-consciously performed in the scenes with Sophie is presented rather differently with Adele, the addict who turns out to be Professor Kosok’s daughter. She is a counterpart to Sophie, yet she is not an idealised body-surface, a boundary that cannot be crossed; rather, her arm has a “track of puncture marks running from wrist to elbow” (175) where she injects herself with drugs. Adele does not appear to want to have sex with Gabriel, but she eventually submits to his advances in exchange for more painkillers. Their relationship stands in stark contrast to the way Sophie is idealised in the first part of the novel, reflecting the change in Gabriel following the fire and his traumatic burns. As with Sophie, sexual imagery is overlaid on Adele’s actions, most notably when she injects herself with the drugs he supplies:

At first the needle would not penetrate, and she prodded and pushed, making a faint mewling sound and arching her back. Then suddenly the tip went in, and the swollen skin slid up around it, like a tiny pouting mouth, drawing the fine steel shaft deep inside itself, and she pressed the plunger slowly, while the pulsing vein sucked and sucked, and

at last she leaned her head back, her eyelids fluttering, and exhaled a long, shivering sigh (209).

Such imagery is inevitably tied to Gabriel's desire rather than Adele's, for it is his continued search for a principle of order that is thematised by their relationship. While the image of penetration may be intended parodically, it nonetheless resonates with the wider context of scientific inquiry troped as masculine penetration of a feminine nature that underlies Banville's presentation of masculinity. Instead of giving Adele the assistance she pleads for to escape the hospital (where she is detained following an overdose), Gabriel tells her of his "moment on the mountain"—the moment of sublime insight that finds chaos to be an "infinite number of ordered things"—and his own emotions become a parody of hers: "A kind of rapture thickened in my throat, I gagged on it as if in grief" (211).

Sophie and Adele emphasise the very conventional terms in which femininity is coded as either pure or corrupt in *Mefisto*. The female body is a formation of power that supports the image of a sublime rational masculinity either as a figuration of its ideal mastery of the symbolic or as part of its disavowal of the possibility of such mastery. Since he is marked by materiality, and can no longer see himself as a disembodied, rational mind, his desire is altered too. The many elements of doubling or mirroring that make up the binary structure of *Mefisto* are reflected in the opposition between the kinds of male heterosexual desire associated with Sophie and Adele respectively. These seemingly mutually exclusive kinds of desire contribute to the way Banville understands masculinity as defined by internal contradictions which, rather than being challenged or mobilised, are intensified and extrapolated into the people and things around them.

## 4.2 Faciality

*Faust:*                    *How comes it then that he is prince of devils?*  
*Mephistopheles:*    *O, by aspiring pride and insolence,*  
                              *For which God threw him from the face of heaven.<sup>7</sup>*

The second part of *Mefisto*, entitled “Angels,” sees Gabriel recover from his burns, meet up with Felix again, and begin working with Professor Kosok, another mathematician whose research involves a supercomputer housed in a stark white underground laboratory. Gabriel’s fascination with binaries that was described in “Marionettes” continues, as he follows Felix into “the spirit of negation.” In order to analyse the effects of Gabriel’s burns and the sense in which a new identity emerges in this part of the novel, I will employ the paradigm described by Deleuze and Guattari as “faciality,” in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. Faces are not vehicles of self-expression—what we think of as the communication of our unique thoughts and feelings—according to Deleuze and Guattari, but “zones of frequency or probability, [that] delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations” (168). The face is “the Icon proper to the signifying regime . . . [it] is what gives the signifier substance . . . [and] fuels interpretation” (115). The face they write about is not a real face (although real faces may be instances of faciality) but a faciality machine, or organisation of rules, that embodies “signifiance” – that realm of signs that refer only to other signs, first described by Ferdinand de Saussure, that Deleuze and Guattari dub “despotic.”

Faciality is not a matter of resemblance to faces, but rather a process in which the face becomes an image or structure through which signs are coded and re-coded: “[f]acialization operates not by resemblance but by an order of reasons” (170). These reasons emerge when Deleuze and Guattari describe faciality as an abstract machine which sorts faces according to a binary, hierarchical, euro-centric template:

Regardless of the content one gives it, the machine constitutes a facial unit, an elementary face in biunivocal relation with another: it is a man *or* a woman, a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, “an x *or* a y.” The movement of the black hole across the screen, the trajectory of the third eye over the surface of reference, constitutes so many dichotomies or arborescences. (177)

Through this machine, visibility (that is, our socialised and accultured interpretation of vision) immediately recognises and categorises features in binary terms by their variation or disruption of the eurocentric archetype. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari specify the archetypal face as the face of “White Man himself” or the face of Christ (176). This binary structure of identity and negation that the facial grid brings to signification is an instance of the representational philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking opposes generally. It is this “machine” that confirms the correctness of cosmetically smoothed and whitened television-faces, just as it is this machine that explains why the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* can claim that his black skin produces invisibility precisely because of its high visibility. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the blank white face or screen provides a space for sorting features and perpetually motivating a “despotic centre” of signification, while minority (or “scapegoat”) features are sent to the periphery or expelled. The second aspect of this machine is, therefore, that “[a]t every moment, the machine rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious” (177).

Another name Deleuze and Guattari use for faciality is the “white wall/black hole system,” because the Christ-face, with its “broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes” (176)—and faces in general—embody the intersection of two systems or regimes of signs. Indeed, it is this combination of regimes that defines faciality. The first regime is called the “signifying regime,” that system of redundant signifiers that has already been described. It is made up of signs which ultimately refer only to other signs, such as the “I” that never dies but can be recycled from person to person. Deleuze and Guattari label this regime paranoid and despotic; they note in it “a hint of the eternal return. There is a whole regime of roving float-

ing statements, suspended names, signs lying in wait to return and be propelled by the chain” (113).<sup>8</sup> The second, contrasting regime is a “passional, postsignifying subjective regime” (120), where, “because the sign breaks its relation of signifi-ance with other signs and sets off racing down a positive line of flight, it attains an *absolute* deterritorialization expressed in the black hole of consciousness and passion” (133). Ronald Bogue describes the post-signifying regime as a line divided into stages beginning at a point of subjectification, and passing through the position of the ‘speaking subject’ (the actual person speaking) and on to the ‘subject of speech’ (the ‘I’ of speech) (141).

Bogue points out that this “doubling of the subject” as it passes along this line of the postsignifying regime “ensures the conformity of mental and dominant reality” (142). Such compliance between the subject who speaks and the subject of the enunciation (or statement) is an entirely different scenario from the distribution of power in the signifying regime, where power is centralised and surrounded by arrays of signifiers. In the black hole, power becomes immanent, and operates through a kind of self-regulation. An example Deleuze and Guattari give, which Bogue glosses, is that of Descartes’s technique of “methodical doubt” which gives rise to a “legislator-subject” associated with the birth of modern philosophy: “The *cogito* initially is at one with a deterritorializing doubt, but it inevitably becomes identified with a specific existence (*ergo sum*) and implicitly with a dominant reality” (Bogue 142). In other words, Cartesian thought aligns the speaking subject with a universal statement (the “I am” which can attach to anyone) that in a sense legitimates the speaking subject. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the more you obey the statements of the dominant reality, the more in command you are as subject of enunciation in mental reality, for in the end you are only obeying yourself!” (130). This process is given substance by the depth of the black hole in which subjectification

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<sup>8</sup> Imhof has suggested that Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return underlies the repetitive structure of *Mefisto* (1987b:116-18). See also *M* 223.

can depart on its self-regulating trajectory?<sup>9</sup>

For Deleuze and Guattari, faciality is evident in many faces and figures from writing, paintings and films, and particularly when the face is connected with the landscape in these contexts. In *Mefisto*, the relation between regimes is part of the dramatisation of Gabriel's struggle to find mathematical truth despite the obscure forces that oppress him. Gabriel's disfigured face demonstrates his ejection from "the face of heaven"—an identity based on pure signifiante—and the initiation of a process of subjectification (or, more accurately, a contestation or dramatisation of self based on the white wall/black hole system).

When Professor Kosok despairs of finding "certainty, order, all that" (193) through his computer experiments, he tells the government official, Miss Hackett, that Gabriel is "the one you need, he thinks that numbers are exact, and rigorous . . . – And look at him, he said. Just look. They might have been standing on the edge of a hole, peering in" (194). Gabriel's disfigurement creates a relative deterritorialization: it extracts him from the circulation of signifiers and places him in a black hole. Yet Gabriel remains charmed and soothed by the signifying world of the computer lab. After the murder of Tony ("severe injuries to the head and face, unrecognizable" (216), Gabriel finds that the city landscape becomes threatening: "[t]wilight I found especially alarming, that hour of shadows and dim perspectives, I fled from it into the fluorescent sanctuary of the white room, where everything seemed its own source of light, and surfaces were impassive, without deceptive depths, and the atmosphere was neutral and inert, like a thin, colourless gas" (217-18). Against the terrors of depth and consciousness he prefers the "impassive" white walls of the underground lab, where he works with Kosok and Leitch, surrounded by a network of signifiante in which more and more inconclusive 'results' are produced. The importance of the lab is simply that it is a space of circulating signifiers,

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<sup>9</sup> "The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of; it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen. The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness or passion, the camera, the third eye" (Deleuze and Guattari 168).

where pages of numbers are constantly being printed, creating ever more data and investing further in the search for some kind of unification.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the government funding for Kosok's vague research project suggests that it is an operation of state power; the project seems devoted to revealing a "master signifier . . . [and a] spiral of infinite signification itself requiring a mechanism of continuous interpretation" (Bogue 139).

For Deleuze and Guattari, this kind of search for a master signifier is paranoid. However, their description of this paranoia mirrors the structure of the sublime in its operation as an element of the masochistic model of power outlined by Mansfield (1997:23-32) and discussed elsewhere in this thesis:

The paranoiac shares this impotence of the deterritorialized sign assailing him from every direction in the gliding atmosphere, but that only gives him better access to the superpower of the signifier, through the royal feeling of wrath, as master of the network . . . The paranoid despotic regime: they are attacking me and making me suffer, but I can guess what they're up to, I'm one step ahead of them, I've always known, I have power even in my impotence. (Deleuze and Guattari 112)

In other words, the more powerless signification makes me, the more I suspect my power to overcome its barriers. Banville's structural imitation of *Faust* underwrites this dynamic. In Goethe's play, Faust strikes a bargain with Mephistopheles and gains the power and knowledge to do whatever he likes for the remainder of his life. In Banville's version, both the Faust figures, Kasperl and Kosok, have very circumscribed spheres of power, and although both are mathematicians, have both given up on the quest for absolute knowledge. Banville has Gabriel seek this kind of knowledge, with Felix—"I never forget a face, you know" (142)—as his mocking and mysterious guide. Felix persuades Gabriel to believe that everything can be formalized

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriel's search echoes the description of the aesthetic moment in *Birchwood*, when another Gabriel asserts that "They must mean something, these moments when the pig finds the truffle in the muck" (B 11).



and rationalised through signification: “Felix listened to me, he understood. That’s it, he said, that’s it! Smiling and nodding, urging me on. To know, to do, to delve into the secret depths of things, wasn’t that what he had always urged on me?” (211). Gabriel’s quest is presented as largely aesthetic (just as it was in Banville’s portrayal of Copernicus and Kepler), and he seems to enjoy his “paranoia.”<sup>11</sup> The sublime moment occurs when he can sense a formal mathematical “solution” to the relations between things in the world, such as his epiphany, suggestive of chaos theory and fractal relationships, that “chaos is nothing but an infinite number of ordered things” (183). Often, as with the previous example of the computer lab, such intuitions are given substance through faciality. For instance, whiteness and light suggest a surface for signification: “When I turned my head a magnified eye, my own, loomed at me in a shaving mirror. I looked at things around me, that tap, an old razor, a mug with a toothbrush standing in it, their textures blurred and thickened in the ivory light of morning, and I felt for a second I was being shown something” (198).<sup>12</sup> This is a familiar scene in Banville’s fiction. The looming black hole of the eye moves over a reflective white screen, registering its unfamiliarity or estrangement, and intensifying its depth.

Sophie, who has “dark, doll’s eyes” (*M* 76), has already been discussed as a bodily surface upon which Gabriel’s idealising tendencies attempt to work. However, the photographs Sophie shows Gabriel in “Marionettes” offer another instance “being shown something” significant that is embodied through the white wall/black hole system. Sophie’s black and white photographs exemplify the system of faciality in the sense that the signs they contain are eminently readable through their biunivocal relation to an ‘other’ who is sacrificed or appropriated to become an aspect of the same within the phallogocentric system. In the photographs, we

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<sup>11</sup> In a conversation with Professor Kosok, Gabriel is asked “What is exact in numbers?”, and answers “not the numbers themselves, but . . . Something else” (187). Gabriel notes during this conversation that the Professor’s “right eye-socket was larger than the left” (*ibid.*).

<sup>12</sup> “Even a use-object may come to be facialized: you might say that a house, utensil, or object, an article of clothing, etc., is *watching me*, not because it resembles a face, but because it is taken up in the white wall/black hole process” (Deleuze and Guattari 175; original emphasis).

can see the machine at its work, facializing what are otherwise singular scraps of reality; they show

a close-up of a stout baby with the head of a blank-eyed caesar, a crooked shot of a donkey wearing a straw hat, a formal portrait of servants arrayed like an orchestra on the front steps of the house . . . Here was a back view of a large lady in a bustle leaning over a balcony, while behind her a whiskered gentleman gazed in lively surmise at a plump, cleft peach he was holding in his hand and about to bite . . . The final picture was of the woman alone. She sat naked astride a straight-backed chair, grinning into the camera, with her hands on her bulging hips and her legs thrust wide apart. Her sex, defenceless and thrilling, was like some intricate, tasseled creature brought up from the secret depths of the sea. (45-46)

It is not resemblance to a face that is important, but rather the way social meanings and hierarchies are structured according to the white wall/black hole system. Thus the infant is given the depthless eyes of a plaster bust; it has eyes but no black holes, no entrance to subjectification. The donkey is a joke Houyhnhnm, a non-human wearing a hat.<sup>13</sup> The peach the “whiskered gentleman” bites signifies a kind of metonymic possession of the woman in his field of vision (ownership of the “cleft”), while the final picture confirms this by offering up a visual display of the woman’s genitals. Indeed, the expression “lively surmise” implies that some conclusion has been reached, or is to be reached, from the comparison the image offers. The genitals are facialized, becoming an extension of the faciality system; for it is not the woman’s body that is offered, but a binary categorisation. Brought up from the “secret depths,” according to

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between masks that code the head as a part of the body and the faciality system. “Primitive” masks may be part of a “collective, polyvocal, and corporeal” semiotic (175), where “paintings, tattoos, or marks on the skin embrace the multidimensionality of bodies . . . [and] involve an animal Spirit that takes possession of the body’s interior, enters its cavities, and fills its volumes instead of making a face for it” (176). The face is entirely different; it is a Western sign system, and the hat is surely a frame for the face, a shade and protection for its efficient operation.

Gabriel's description, the female genitals present a visual "truth" through the figure of a foreign organism – "some intricate, tasseled creature."<sup>14</sup> These photos are eventually incorporated into the stage for Sophie's marionette show (113-14), which tells Gabriel's story visually, down to minute details of appearance (the Gabriel puppet's face is a "blank mask" (120)). The show functions as a *mise en abyme* emphasising the deterministic pattern of Gabriel's life, with the idealised Sophie as puppeteer.

This brings us to several instances of the faciality system tied to the plot progression (such as it exists) leading up to and after the fire. The most obvious face to consider is Gabriel's own, which is severely disfigured when Ashburn House burns down, and which dramatically marks the transition from the first to second part of the novel. However, it is just after his mother's death that faces become important. He is shown the wrong body at the morgue and wonders, "Could it be that this really was my mother, and they had arranged her face all wrong somehow? Was that why they needed me to identify her, so they could make the necessary readjustments?" (103). Gabriel suspects that the face really is just a collection of signs, rather than a feature of permanent and essential humanity.

Describing how he immersed himself in mathematics—in a rigidly organised order of signs—to cope with the loss of his mother, he finds that he can no longer fix reality, that "everything was sway and flow and sudden lurch. Surfaces that had seemed solid began to give way under me . . . I held my face in my hands, that too flowed away, the features melting, even the eyeholes filling up, until all that was left was a smooth blank mask of flesh" (109-110).<sup>15</sup> This description of imagined melting and flowing (which prefigures the actual event) might be interpreted as a loss of consciousness and feeling, or the breaking up of the process of subjec-

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<sup>14</sup> At Gabriel's mother's wake, a bunch of roses is similarly described: "they hung there in our midst, nude, labiate and damp, like the delicate inner parts of some fabulous, forgotten creature" (107).

<sup>15</sup> Even the images associated with the accident that kills Gabriel's mother and wounds his father and uncle emphasise the white wall/black hole system: "Windscreen, [the doctor] said, smacking a fist into a palm . . . Big black dog, he says, ran right under the wheel" (101). As Gabriel leaves the hospital, there are trees "in blossom in the square, pink and ivory, purest white. A crow flapped past low overhead" (105).

tification. Gabriel's image of numbers as fixing things and making them certain, "falling on the chaos of things like frost falling on water, the seething particles tamed and sorted . . . I could feel it in my mind, the crunch of things coming to a stop, the creaking stillness, the stunned, white air" (109) is a key example of the aesthetic of stillness or suspension that is found frequently in Banville's fiction. The break-up of this image as Gabriel senses everything 'melting' suggests the point of subjectification, the image of idealised stillness, no longer holds him, and that his mental reality no longer conforms with the dominant reality he had believed in: "marshal the factors how I might, they would not equate now . . . Zero, minus quantities, irrational numbers, the infinite itself, suddenly these things revealed themselves for what they really had been, always" (109). The line of subjectification breaks up as his belief in a mathematical and aesthetic 'solution' to life's big questions evaporates.

The traumatic burns Gabriel receives at the end of "Marionettes" fulfills this premonition of facelessness, making him literally resemble the "blank mask" (120) of the puppet that represents him in Sophie's marionette theatre. There is also an element of punishment by hellfire, as Ashburn house collapses into the mine: "A red roar came up out of the hole, and I flew on flaming wings" (120). On the one hand, it appears the burns and the unknowable power that produced them came close to destroying Gabriel; in hospital he lies barely conscious, holding on to "an ember of awareness" (123). His burns are severe: "[s]corched hands, scorched back, shins charred to the bone. Bald of course. And my face. My face. A wad of livid dough, blotched and bubbled, with clown's nose, no chin, two watery little eyes peering out in disbelief" (125). The face with which one passes through the faciality machine has been melted and reshaped; far from the smooth mask he earlier imagined, it is now a "disfigured" screen, a surface that does not reflect signs with 'symmetrical efficiency' and biunivocal clarity. This event is, as Deleuze and Guattari predict, a disruption of the correctness or rightfulness of Gabriel's participation in signification.

Yet there is a sense in which Gabriel is less recovered than reborn as a new version of himself.<sup>16</sup> His injuries cause a break with the “white wall” and at the same time an intensification of the break that subjectivity, associated with depth and the ‘black holes’ of the eyes. In the early stages of his recovery, Gabriel experiences constant pain, and so clings to the painkillers that he names after mythical female monsters – Lamia, Oread, Lemures, Empusa (the latter three are all from Goethe’s *Faust*). He calls Lamia, in particular, “my darling . . . my love” (*M* 123), and gives her a face: “your smooth skin of tenderest mauve, your insides white as white, your name in wonderfully clear, minute print, and that coy little letter R, enclosed in a ring, like a beauty spot on your glossy cheek” (*ibid*). The putatively monstrous (and female) painkiller has a face, and it is one that seems to be a tiny portal to the renewal of the subjectification process. Now, rather than devotion to an ideal pure surface of numbers, Gabriel turns to an interiority that is characterised by pain and drugs.

Several of the characters he meets following his injuries reinforce this new subjectivity exemplified by the face. In hospital, Gabriel sympathises with the matron, because the other nurses exclude her and talk behind her back, but perhaps also because “[h]er face was covered with freckles, big coffee-coloured splashes, the backs of her hands too” (128). Like the pills she secretly supplies to Gabriel, the matron’s face presents a surface marked with black holes. They are excluded and thus brought together by their facial difference: “Her freckles, my burns” (133). Moreover, the matron becomes his accomplice in exploiting Adele, supplying him with pills that he passes on to her.

Towards the end of “Angels” there is a scene where Gabriel talks to Fat Dan the barman and meets his mother.<sup>17</sup> This scene—which otherwise seems a rather bizarre inclusion in what

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<sup>16</sup> Banville has suggested that the second part sees the replacement of one twin with the other: “I had always thought of the Gabriel of Part I being somehow supplanted by his dead twin in Part II. Certainly something mysterious happened in the space between the two parts. At the beginning of Part II, in the ‘birth scene’ in the hospital, Gabriel II remarks that ‘something had sheared away, when I pulled through’; perhaps it was Gabriel I that died in Part II? I don’t know” (Banville, *qtd. in* Berensmeyer 193)

<sup>17</sup> At one meeting, Fat Dan greets Gabriel with “a large, slow wink, involving less the closing of an eye than the opening sideways of his mouth” (222).

is already quite a bizarre novel—makes sense only if we place it in the context of faciality. Fascinated by Gabriel's burns, Dan asks "did you get acid on you, or what?" (227); Felix ironically jokes that "It's the mark of Cain, Dan" (ibid.), then a moment later adds "And now he's banished, in the land of Nod" (228). Interestingly, Deleuze and Guattari associate the "subjective or passionate regime" that emerges in the black holes of eyes with the biblical betrayals of figures such as Cain, Jonah and Jesus. In this passionate or post-signifying regime, signs turn away from the face or swallow up the surface of endlessly circulating signifiers. Here it is Cain who is "the true man [who] never ceases to betray God just as God betrays man, with the wrath of God defining the new positivity" (Deleuze and Guattari 123). Such betrayal is also linked to the sorting function of the facility machine by Grayson Cooke, who asks "what is facial deviance but a form of betrayal, a betrayal of the 'rightness' of the face and the whole signifying regime that surrounds it?" (Cooke 2001). Significantly, Deleuze and Guattari associate Cain's betrayal—characterised by turning away from the face of God and by a necessary betrayal of the law—with a Kafkaesque state of "existence in reprieve, *indefinite postponement*" (123, 115; original emphasis).

The parallel is very suggestive, considering that Gabriel exists, like Cain, at the expense of his twin brother. Furthermore, he is formed and re-formed as a subject, or a self, through his subjection to or suffering of God's will: he becomes who he is by aspiring to a kind of ultimate knowledge, imitating the mathematics of Kasperl/Kosok, and desiring Sophie/Adele. Despite his failures and misadventures, Gabriel continues. He returns to the idealism he began with, confirming the reiterative or repetitive structure of his attempts to reach sublime 'truth': "I have begun to work again, tentatively. I have gone back to the very start, to the simplest things. Simple! I like that. It will be different this time, I think it will be different" (234). This important point (going on) underlies the masochistic attraction to suffering and error that masculine subjectivity seems bound to here and elsewhere in Banville's fiction.

A second aspect to Gabriel's encounter with Fat Dan occurs when Gabriel is taken upstairs to the room where the barman's mother resides. Mammy is "a vast woman," whose "bloated face glistened in the glare of the coals like a glazed mask that had begun to melt" (228). Repeatedly, Gabriel describes her face, and the "black holes" of her eyes: "Out of that swollen mask two tiny glittering eyes fixed on me in an avid, unwavering stare. She did not speak" (228). On the next page he notes "[h]er face was almost featureless, nose, mouth, cheeks, all had melted into shapeless fat. Only the eyes remained, undimmed. Since I came in her gaze had not shifted from me for an instant, it was at once remote and intent, as if she were not used to looking at human creatures" (229). Mammy's is another "melted" face, reduced to a shapeless surface suggestive of the "white wall/black hole" machine.

Gabriel's description lists sundry objects in the room, and in the end describes the sense that he himself feels like one of these objects too, stuck as he is in Mammy's unchanging gaze:

I wanted to leave, to get away, yet could not . . . And it seemed to me that somehow I had always been here, and somehow would remain here always, among Mammy's things, with her little unrelenting eye fixed on me. She signified something, no, she signified nothing. She had no meaning. She was simply there. And would be there, waiting, in that fetid little room, forever. (230)

The context of faciality provides a reading that replaces the superficial sense in which Mammy has been read previously. Kersti Tarien Powell's suggestion—that Mammy is a "tragicomic warning" urging readers to preserve "the essential mystery of things [that] has to be taken on trust" (Powell 2005:210)—identifies too readily, as do many other critics, with Gabriel's (and perhaps Banville's) implicit epistemological assumptions. Mammy does not signify nothing; she is the body of the screen off which signifiers can bounce, or, as I argued earlier in this chapter, she is the material existence which must be disavowed and locked away for the masculine "body of reason" to operate. Mammy's "fall into flesh" (224) indicates that she is

represents a disavowed materiality (with all its connotations of matrix and motherhood). She is thus the substance taken up by form but remaining unacknowledged – locked out of sight and out of mind. Mammy is distinct from Sophie’s mystical or aestheticised body and Adele’s addicted and abused body in that she is neither a screen nor a hole, but a grotesque presence that does not qualify as the ‘right’ kind of presence in Banville’s fictional worlds.

Mammy’s camera-like eyes, staring out of the blank screen of her face, fix on all the objects that fill her room. Gabriel’s sense is that he becomes one of these objects, and this demonstrates his desire to position himself at the inferior or “subjected” pole of a system of binary signification. By presenting himself as the object of Mammy’s gaze, he is producing a masochistic dynamic through the reversal of looks. Sophie and Adele, we might recall, both have “heart-shaped” faces (36, 154) and are always the object of Gabriel’s gaze rather than the reverse. This scene looks forward to the painting motifs that take centre stage in Banville’s novels for more than a decade following *Mefisto*. In *The Book of Evidence* for instance, a similar exchange of gazes produces the sense that “[i]t was not just the woman’s painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly” (79).

A similar link arises in *The Newton Letter*, through an allusion to Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *The Chandos Letter*. Elke D’hoker’s discussion of the parallel between Hofmannsthal and Banville centres on the idea of a negative aesthetic, or *via negativa*, which operates by “suggesting presence indirectly, through in fact affirming absence” (D’hoker 2002:39). In Chandos’s renunciation of the capacity to write and therefore enter into the process of signification because of its implications of epistemological and linguistic mastery, Hofmannsthal evokes a face: “Individual words swam around me; they melted into eyes, which stared at me, and which I had to stare back at” (qtd. in D’hoker 2002:37). Here, the white wall/black hole machine is evoked when Chandos rejects a reductive realist model of representation: words detach from their referents, and seem to become deterritorialized.



Chandos, like Banville's Newton historian, finds himself drawn to the inexpressible uniqueness of commonplace objects:

I feel an enchanting limitless counterpoint within me and around me, and among the substances playing against one another, there is none in which I could not flow. At such a time, I feel as though my body consisted entirely of ciphers, which reveal everything to me. Or as though we could enter into a new, intuitive relationship with the whole universe, if we began to think with our hearts. (cited in D'hoker 2002:37)

Hofmansthal's Chandos seems to have a lot in common with Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on thinking philosophically through flows and connections of becoming as distinct from the tendency to privilege being and consciousness as in traditional Western metaphysics. Nonetheless, the possibility of becoming someone or something else is framed in terms of state changes within the overall framework of the faciality system.

### 4.3 The New Man

In *Mefisto*, the disfigurement of the masculine subject accompanies a seeming disavowal of the power to master the signifying regime. The protagonist's flight "up out into cold blue air" appears as a symbolic "casting out" of the rightness of the signifying regime. Yet Gabriel's disfigurement only makes his quest for knowledge stronger, since it encourages him to go "back to the very start, to the simplest things" (234) and begin rebuilding his previous project. Indeed, many of what I would call the novel's most aestheticised moments—moments of the sublime—occur as Gabriel returns to his mathematics, and the 'paranoid' signifying regime it is associated with:

Everything had brought me to this knowledge, there was no smallest event that had not been part of the plot. Or perhaps I should say: had brought me back . . . Something had opened up inside me on the mountain, some rapt, patient, infinitely attentive thing . . . It was here, in the big world, that I would meet what I was waiting for, that perfectly simple, ravishing, unchallengeable formula in the light of which the mask of mere contingency would melt. (185-86)

Gabriel is re-injected into the search for a "master signifier" or formal expression that will encompass all of reality. In spite of the damage to his face, and the abuse he inflicts on Adele (it is easy to forget that Adele in fact dies of an overdose, so deeply is the narrative identified with Gabriel's consciousness) he is able to re-integrate himself into his previous line of subjectification. Significantly, the paranoid project he rejoins aims for the removal of "the mask of mere contingency"; this, Deleuze and Guattari would say, is the impossible dream of the paranoid signifying regime. No matter how many messages are sent, no matter what the formulation or pathway taken, the subject will never get inside the castle of pure meaning.

As he concludes, Gabriel writes: “My face is almost mended, one morning I’ll wake up and not recognize myself in the mirror. A new man” (233-34). The creation of a ‘new man’, we recall, echoes the product of Sacher-Masoch’s stories: despite the cruel subjection the hero of such fiction willingly endures (and, indeed, procures for himself), he is “reborn” at the other end as finally empowered to choose his own destiny. As I have shown, understanding this narrative pattern as “masochistic” provides new insights into *Mefisto*. The novel presents a (non-)progression in which subjection to the other—variously figured as fate, God, or an aestheticised, distant femininity—leads to pain and physical ‘disfigurement,’ but also to a pleasurable potential. *Mefisto* initially seems to negate and double this masculinist, Faustian quest for idealist knowledge and power, but, like Gabriel, this quest is finally reborn through the re-assertion of an intuited, yet-to-be-realised formal pattern underlying reality. As Gabriel returns to the everyday world Felix may at any time appear as “a face slyly smiling among the faceless ones” (234).

## Chapter 5

# **“A pictured world, not a world anatomized”: Portraits of Masculinity in *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena***

### **5.1 Art as Excuse: *The Book of Evidence***

*even remembering evil can be a pleasure when the evil is mixed I won't say with good, but  
with variety, the volatile, the changeable, in other words with what I can also call good,  
which is the pleasure of seeing things from a distance and narrating them as what is past.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter's night a traveller*, 112.

*Whatever, albeit contrary to truth, fails to concern justice in any way, is mere fiction, and I confess that someone who reproaches himself for a pure fiction as if it were a lie has a conscience that is more delicate than mine.*<sup>2</sup>

In her introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing: New critical essays*, Jo Gill could be describing a John Banville novel when she writes that it is in “its inability to remember . . . in its ironical parody of ‘self-abasement expressed in clichés’ . . . in its de-centering of the subject . . . that modern confession distinguishes itself” (8). Modern confession’s self-reflexivity derives from an awareness of the long history and abundant literature of confession within western culture. Informed by Foucault’s work on the genealogy of the subject, Gill also argues that “confession takes place in a context of power, and prohibition, and surveillance. It is generated and sustained not by the troubled subject/confessant, but by the discursive relationship between speaker and reader (confessant and confessor)” (4). Understanding the drive to confess as discursively constructed is a significant step, for it contradicts or at least complicates the long-standing notion that “[c]onfession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis of rehabilitation” (Brooks 2000:2). Confession is supposed to reflect the truth of the subject and elucidate the motives for his or her wrongful actions, but at the same time Gill allows that it is the potentially coercive product of an array of indeterminate signifiers, a demand to define interiority in a language that comes from outside. We might surmise that “confession” stands for the complex production of this act of “self-recognition” rather than simply facilitating the declarations of a pre-existing and original subject. As such, confession exhibits what Judith Butler describes as the subject’s fundamentally ambivalent relationship to power: the individual is formed both through subjection to, and through the assumption

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, qtd. in de Man, “Excuses (*Confessions*)” *Allegories of Reading*, 292.

of, power (1997:2). In many circumstances the confessant is compelled to confess, but for a confession to be credible it must at the same time be considered to be given freely, or at least free from unacceptable forms of duress. This may leave us to wonder about the exact relation between such confession and the real – the empirical world of material cause and effect, and of material and ethical consequences.

The curious literary dimension of this relationship is explored in De Man's reading of the famous episode of the ribbon in Rousseau's *Confessions*, which turns on the elaboration of two modes of confessional language – one referential and cognitive, the other verbal and performative. While referential statements can be verified by evidence, purely verbal statements about the confessant's interior state cannot, and it is in the "discrepancy between them that the possibility of excuse arises" (de Man 1979:281). When Rousseau tells how he stole the ribbon and then accused Marion of the crime he himself committed, he suggests his accusation—ostensibly motivated by the shame of his theft potentially being exposed—is the strange result of the nature of desire. Rousseau desires Marion and wants her to desire him and to establish a reciprocity between them, and it is this desire for "substitution," as de Man puts it, that produces the accusation: "I accused Marion of having done what I wanted to do and of having given me the ribbon because it was my intention to give it to her" (Rousseau qtd. in de Man 284). De Man sees "the ribbon substituting for a desire which is itself a desire for substitution. Both are governed by the same desire for specular symmetry which gives to the symbolic object a detectable, univocal proper meaning" (de Man 284). It seems that Rousseau articulates his desire for Marion in these terms because the substitution of the signifiers "Marion" and "ribbon" for the 'real' Marion allows him to structure both her desire and his own. Such a structure serves the performative dimension of Rousseau's text, insofar as "what Rousseau really wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets" (285). His confession can be understood, therefore, simply as a deplorable "stage on which to parade his disgrace" (286). According to de Man, this desire for self-exposure is

continuously spurred by the act of confessing, “for each new stage in the unveiling suggests a deeper shame, a greater impossibility to reveal, and a greater satisfaction in outwitting this impossibility” (286).

Yet the excuse of shame and self-exposure merely introduces a much more far-reaching and radical excuse. Rousseau claims his utterance of Marion’s name is without cause, and that it was a pure coincidence that her name happened to come to mind: “Je m’excusai sur le premier objet qui s’offrit.”<sup>3</sup> De Man elaborates on this excuse that “any other sound or noise could have done just as well” (288) by suggesting that Rousseau’s words are an anacoluthon, a “foreign element” (289) or disruption in the text that is essentially without meaning. Drawing on the *Fourth Rêverie*, in which Rousseau again attempts to excuse his denunciation of Marion and revisits his lingering guilt over the writing of the *Confessions*, de Man advances his thesis that language is “machinic,” and that it operates as part of the construction of the subject rather than as an instrument wielded by an already formed, autonomous subject. Rousseau’s argument that certain “fictions” or omissions of truth are excusable so long as they have no effect on justice, as quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, harbours the greatest excuse of all. De Man understands such “fictions” as the effect of an endlessly repeated tune played by the mechanical, anti-humanist machine of language to which the psyche of the subject must dance: “Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default” (299). It is the writing itself that generates both pleasure and guilt, generates the entire drama of the subject, while at the same time the subject remains protected by the “text-machine’s infinite power to excuse” (299). This dislocation of language from the referential function results in a paradoxical account of the power of writing: writing is thus both radically independent from the subject and relentlessly effective in its interpellation of the subject. There is no resolution to such a problem, and this accounts for the need to keep generating the writing which is

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<sup>3</sup> “I excused myself upon the first thing that offered itself” (de Man 288). De Man notes the possible sexual implication of the phrase, which “has to be resisted if the effectiveness of the excuse is not to be undone and replaced by the banality of mere bad faith and suspicion” (292).

itself the disjunction between reference and performance: “At the end of the [*Fourth Rêverie*], Rousseau knows that he cannot be excused, yet the text shelters itself from accusation by the performance of its radical fictionality” (294).

The desire to be exposed is also Banville’s starting point for Freddie Montgomery’s confession in *The Book of Evidence*. Freddie clearly savours the hyperbole surrounding his arrest and the public interest in him, for he associates himself with animality, criminality and spectacle. He sees himself as a dangerous “exotic animal” in the eyes of the public, a projection of the transgressive desires of others: “they clawed at each other to get a look at me. They would have paid money for the privilege, I believe. They shouted abuse, and shook their fists at me, showing their teeth” (3). Banville is quite aware of the distinction between cognitive and performative modes of confession and exploits it as much as possible. Although lying is not a particularly important part of Freddie’s crime, it is central to his explanation and possible defense of his actions and to the framing of his narrative identity. For instance, the false name Freddie concocts in order to hire a car, Smyth, prompts him to note that he “thought the *y* a fiendishly clever touch” (99). Freddie even describes his “hopelessly romantic expectations” of prison life, and imagines himself “striking an elegant pose, my ascetic profile lifted to the light in the barred window, fingering a scented handkerchief and faintly smirking, Jean-Jacques the cultured killer” (5). When describing the act of stealing the painting and kidnapping the maid, Josephine Bell,<sup>4</sup> he feels “[i]mpatience . . . and a grievous sense of embarrassment. I was mortified. I had never been so exposed in all my life. People were looking at me” (112).

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<sup>4</sup> Josephine Bell is the pseudonym of Doris Bell Ball, a prolific British crime writer active from the late 1930s up to the 1970s. Banville’s interest in crime fiction, and the fact that *The Book of Evidence* may be considered to be related to that genre, makes this a tantalising allusion. The fact that Bell and Banville share initials suggests a link, and certain elements of Bell’s profile in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, (ed.) John M. Reilly (London: Macmillan Press, 1980) resonate with the kind of metafictional self-commentary Banville creates in *Athena*. For instance: “The weakest aspect of Bell’s art is plotting. Action is sometimes insufficient to sustain the interest and suspects too few to provide the suspense necessary for a strong conclusion” (92-3). More importantly, by having Freddie club to death a representative of the crime genre, which is driven by faith in the referential function of language, the ultimate knowability of the transgressor’s motives, and the inevitable resolution of conflict, he adds an intertextual dimension to his creation of a performative excuse.



However, he admits later that this embarrassment covers a desire for exposure of the most humiliating kind:

Did I want to be found out, did I hope to see my name splashed in monster type across every front page? I think I did. I think I longed deep down to be made to stand in front of a jury and reveal all my squalid little secrets. Yes, to be found out, to be suddenly pounced upon, beaten, stripped, and set before the howling multitude, that was my deepest, most ardent desire. (161)

This book of evidence consists mostly of interior monologue and therefore gives the reader few opportunities to check Freddie's referential statements, but it is not lacking in performative enactments of his thoughts, feelings and intentions. Like Rousseau, Freddie derives much pleasure from the opportunity to have his guilt exposed and his name denounced, and this is closely linked to the pleasure of writing, especially of the speculative, hyperbolic kind – "monster type" even puns on the discursive construction of a criminal subjectivity. In typical Banville fashion, Inspector Haslet's question at the very end of the novel—"Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true? (220)—casts further doubt over the veracity of Freddie's narrative, and the matter is ultimately left up to the reader to judge. Freddie's response, "All of it. None of it. Only the shame" (220), simply articulates the discrepancy that de Man has suggested allows the excuse to exist.

The contrast between Freddie's own narrative "with all its . . . frills and fancy bits" and the "stark essentials" (203) of the police statement he is required to sign highlights the power relationship at work between these modes of confession and the way in which the performative can subvert the referential. The police statement uses direct and instrumental language, but Freddie thinks "a fiendish artist had been at work . . . he had turned everything to his purpose, mis-spellings, clumsy syntax, even the atrocious typing. Such humility, such deference, such ruthless suppression of the ego for the sake of the text" (202-3). Yet, Freddie performs

his submission to the impersonal and factual account of his crime in such a way that his agreement resists its commitment to referentiality. In a moment of grotesque literalism Freddie imagines sticking himself with a pin and signing the police statement in his own blood (203). Similarly, his desire to plead guilty before the law—against his wife Daphne’s wishes and lawyer Maolseachlainn’s advice—seems to indicate a desire to perpetuate the need for an excuse that echoes the masochist’s requirement of contractual relations. The guarantee of guilt enables the writing of the excuse to continue, even when the excuse operates by announcing its inability to excuse.

While this enjoyment of self-exposure is evident throughout *The Book of Evidence*, I will argue here that it is the ‘episode of the painting’ which is central to Freddie’s excuse, and which adds further complexities of referentiality and performance of a masculine subjectivity to the excuse as de Man finds it in Rousseau. However, two differences between Banville and Rousseau are immediately apparent. First, Rousseau generates guilt disproportionate to the relatively venial crimes he commits, whereas *The Book of Evidence* involves very serious crimes: the theft of a very valuable painting and murder. Second, the painting Freddie steals, *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*, gives the excuse a significant visual and aesthetic dimension as well as an ethical one. The painting is not, like the ribbon, a mere scrap of material which can almost accidentally become a signifier within a system of substitutions and desires; it is a far more complex element in a visual system that remains rooted in the desire to possess and the desire to know. The use of the painting as excuse introduces a visual element outside of the play of signs which seems (by contrast) to offer a stable, referential form of representation. Yet, the allegorical relation between Freddie’s encounter with the painting and his encounter with Josie Bell, when he clubs her to death, complicates the implied referentiality of the visual, just as it complicates the male desire for a ‘female other’ in which Banville’s text parallels Rousseau’s. Thus evidence—a word derived from *videre*, meaning “to see”—is first idealised, then rejected as a superior mode of truth by its transcription into a book, and by the violent

mis-recognition, or failure of recognition, that takes place when Freddie kills. Like the claim of utter contingency in Rousseau's accusation of Marion, Freddie's desires circulate within him until he suddenly 'acts'—without intention he would like readers to believe—and only later comes to excuse himself by referring to the aporetic relation between visual and verbal representations. If Freddie's narrative is an excuse, it is one in which the confession of truth and the experience of visual art are closely inter-related in the production of a narrative self.<sup>5</sup>

The visual aspect of Banville's fiction has now received quite a lot of critical attention, from hints in Rudiger Imhof's 1989 study, which touched on structure and spatiality, to more recent articles, such as those by Françoise Canon-Roger and Joseph McMinn, which detail how the painting motif becomes central from *The Book of Evidence* onwards.<sup>6</sup> Little attention, however, had been given to the ways in which representations of gender are linked to visuality in Banville's works prior to Anja Müller's discussion of ekphrasis as foregrounding the discursive construction of a feminine materiality in the Frames trilogy. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, Müller argues that ekphrasis functions "as a multi-layered discursive matrix for the materialization of the female body" (187). Further, she suggests that ekphrasis—"the verbal representation of a visual representation" (186)—brings

the closure-providing function of the frame [to] the narrator's attempts to represent women by relating them to paintings and by almost treating them as if they were pictures. However, the novels also play with these aesthetic presuppositions of unity and closure, showing their inadequacy and thus challenging precisely the ideas of wholeness or presence commonly associated with frames (186-7)

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<sup>5</sup> This combination of elements is ubiquitous in Banville's other novels in which paintings feature as a central motif. In *Athena*, Aunt Corky's invented Dutch persona is excusable because she "lied with such simplicity and sincere conviction that really, it was not lying at all but a sort of continuing reinvention of the self" (22). In *The Untouchable*, Victor Maskell sees his false statements as entertainment: "By now I was only lying for fun, for recreation, you might say, like a retired tennis pro knocking up with an old opponent" (6).

<sup>6</sup> Françoise Canon-Roger, "John Banville's *Imagines* in 'the Book of Evidence'." *European Journal of English Studies (Netherlands)* 4.1 (2000): 25-38; Joseph McMinn, "Ekphrasis and the Novel: The Presence of Paintings in John Banville's Fiction." *Word and Image* 18.2 (2002): 137-45.

Müller's identification of the "inadequacy" of these ideal Romantic values suggests that her account of framing relates not only to a representational conundrum but to the ideal masculine visual subject whose existence is concealed and re-affirmed precisely through the establishment of these values of closure and presence in the represented object. Indeed, she shows that it is not a real relation to a woman that is important in these novels, but that the operation of these somehow deficient or diminished representational strategies is Banville's main concern (190).<sup>7</sup>

I will argue that insofar as Banville participates in excuse making here, he does so as part of a masochistic power structure, and that this power structure is articulated through the relationship between the visual and the verbal. As D'hoker notes, Freddie rehearses Nietzschean and Freudian excuses but ultimately attributes the murder to his "failure of imagination" (2004a:149). This imagination centres around the privileged visual subject, and if there is a clear statement that sets up the outrageous excuse of the painting as the cause of Freddie's actions, it is this highly rhetorical one :

You have seen the picture in the papers, you know what she looks like . . . Yet I put it to you, gentle connoisseurs of the jury, that even knowing all this you still know nothing, next to nothing. You do not know the fortitude and pathos of her presence. You have not come upon her suddenly in a golden room on a summer eve, as I have. You have not held her in your arms, you have not seen her asprawl in a ditch. You have not – ah no! – you have not killed for her (79).

The form of control over desire that is exercised by the excuse is the same kind of control sought by the masochistic aesthetic. As we have seen, the latter creates a performative discourse through which the desire to possess an ideal is frustrated or negated. Because this negation is desexualised and transferred to the project of writing, the subject is able to per-

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<sup>7</sup> I discuss the deconstruction of the frame in some detail in the second section of this chapter.

petuate a satisfactory space of desire through that writing. Banville enmeshes Freddie in an aesthetic desire for authoritative representation, but renders his goal impossible by locating his desire in visual representation, which, despite Freddie's best ekphrastic efforts, cannot be made present through language. This strategy positions Freddie as inadequate before the visual and unable to discursively control it. The fact that this relation is one between a man and a representation of a woman stems from the role gender plays in the arrangement of power coordinated by the masochistic sublime, and this in turn stems from the way gender is embedded in cultural traditions and assumptions about power, desire and representation. The entire structure enables the excuse to operate more effectively, since Freddie acts not under compulsion, but certainly in a state of self-estrangement: "This process of distancing seems to have been an essential preliminary to action . . . I felt I was utterly unlike myself" (95). Trying to explain this estrangement, Freddie gets confused and asks "which version of *me* do I mean?" (ibid.; original emphasis).

The desire to translate the visual into the written text may be described as what W.J.T. Mitchell calls "ekphrastic hope": that moment when the impossibility of ekphrasis "is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a 'sense' in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: 'to make us see'" (Mitchell 1994:152). Within the spheres of philosophy and cultural theory the privileging of the visual is described by Martin Jay as "ocularcentrism."<sup>8</sup> As well as designating a special kind or degree of meaning, the privileging of the visual

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<sup>8</sup> See Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) for a discussion of the suspicion of vision in influential French social and philosophical theory. Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) proposes a philosophy of difference against the "image of thought" underlying philosophy which he argues reduces difference to the Same by opposition or analogy. In the Anglo-American field, Richard Rorty's influential *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), argues that "[I]t is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, non-empirical methods" (12).

is a question of power—the subjective power to control ‘sight’ and to locate the ‘seen’ discursively, within or as a part of the everyday language we use. It is also about efforts to drive the process of seeing into an anatomical and physical sphere, however metaphorical that might finally end up being, and thus to anchor vision in the ‘real’ world of human thought, perception, experience, and practice. (Burnett 1995:4)

As we saw with Luce Irigaray’s reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave discussed in Chapter One, visuality and the gendered body have often been employed in arguments about truth since it can claim authority over written representations. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie wants the reader to see his wife Daphne’s body in terms of art: “always when I saw her naked I would want to caress her, as I would want to caress a piece of sculpture, hefting the curves in the hollow of my hand, running a thumb down the long smooth lines, feeling the coolness, the velvet texture of the stone” (8). Then he adds: “Clerk, strike that last sentence, it will seem to mean too much” (8), as if his intention was not to admit his over-valuation of art and his aestheticisation of sexual desire. His subsequent description of his fetish for Daphne’s “dim soft grey gaze straying helplessly” (9) when they have sex reinforces this, and foreshadows the reversal of gazes that he will encounter later in the painting. He is excited by Daphne’s “pained, defenceless look” (9) when they are in bed, but is careful to mention that the effect she has on him does not make him “afraid I would give myself into her power, or anything like that” (9). This, however, is precisely the sort of thing that will happen with the painting, at least if we accept the logic of his excuse.

This optimism about the ways in which writing can communicate the force and meaning of visual forms or qualities that are in no way linguistic or semiotic goes to the heart of Banville’s fiction: his writing begins in inarticulacy—“[a]t first it was a form” (*E* 3)—and frequently describes the desire for truth that can be “shown” but not spoken (*DC* 239), or for a “pictured world, not a world anatomized” (Banville 1993c:108). His characters typically seek an image of thought that may remain an entirely mental or theoretical experience and es-

chew being governed by the convention of narrative sequence with its coordination between the interiority of narrative subjects and their experiences and actions in the external world. In Mitchell's sense of the term, "ekphrastic hope" encompasses a fundamental aim of writing when we consider that it can apply not only to the description of artistic representations (paintings, sculpture, films) but to the written presentation of any kind of seen or imaginary world of spaces and objects. Mitchell describes the goal of this translation of the visual into the verbal as an effort to overcome otherness (156), and notes that one of the "utopian aspirations of ekphrasis" is the hope that "poetic language might be 'stilled,' made iconic, or 'frozen' into a static spatial array" (ibid.). By aestheticising the other, difference is contained, but this risks too easily slipping into what Mitchell calls "ekphrastic fear," when the image comes to seem a "deceitful illusion" (ibid.). By destabilising the position of the subject who seeks this utopian image and thereby challenging the forms of desire that implicitly operate alongside ekphrasis (sexual and epistemological possession), the utopian moment can be preserved as an unachievable ideal. It seems Freddie's subject position is destabilised, but in fact he seeks to inhabit the divided, contradictory position between the other as an illusion or projection of the self, and the other as an absolute other. Reading Freddie's narrative as a de Manian excuse requires this provocation, for without it the theft of the painting and subsequent murder are motivated by the mundane desire for money or prestige (desires which Freddie acknowledges as important to him above and beyond the need for money to free Daphne and his son (*BE* 80, 83)).

As Anja Müller has shown, ekphrasis is intrinsically linked to representations of women in *The Book of Evidence*. The similarities (and crucial differences) between Freddie's response to the woman in the painting he steals and to Josie Bell, the woman he brutally murders, seem to be connected to the formal properties of portraiture and the influence these have over him as a viewer. These scenes provide a clear structure through which masculine subjectivity—and Banville's understanding of that subjectivity's relation to power—is presented. Freddie's

excuse derives from the “truth” of the visual image, which he desires to possess and represent in language but cannot in reality master. He invents an elaborate history to supplement the painting (*BE* 105-8), in which he narrates the circumstances surrounding the painting’s creation. However, just as the referential guidebook description of the painting is contradicted by the statement “None of this means anything” (104), the imagined history is similarly negated as soon as it has been recorded. This repetition draws attention to the fact that all writing about the painting is a performative fiction, and that no words can equal its referential visual impact – although whether this fiction comes from the “machine” of language or is fiction because it is manipulated by Freddie remains an open question. Nonetheless, even a reproduction of the fateful painting causes Freddie’s heart to contract (104-5). He is compelled to write about the painted woman because there is, he feels, “something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage. I squirm in the grasp of her gaze. She requires of me some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention, of which I do not think I am capable. It is as if she were asking me to let her live” (105). Like the grotesque figure of Mammy in *Mefisto*, the painting creates a discomforting female gaze that is described holding some power over the male narrator, but which is attributed to a static (and ugly) feminine figure rather than a real female subject. As I will discuss later, this gaze is central to the ethical claim some critics argue is evident in Freddie’s encounter with the painting.

As excuse, the painted image is much more effective than mere writing since it appears to be more natural and more directly related to its real referents than the abstract, sequential system of signifiers available in language. However, this effect is not an essential or natural one, because the text-image difference is a social and cultural construct organised around oppositions such as high versus popular culture or art versus craft. Mitchell’s examples of this differentiation are pertinent to the present discussion:

The ‘differences’ between images and language are not merely formal matters: they



are, in practice, linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; between 'hearsay' and 'eyewitness' testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation and modes of experience. (1994:5)

While Banville's novels focus on these differences primarily because of their formal characteristics, the social implications are also always present and are anticipated and deflected by Banville's text in a number of ways. Firstly, the subject of the painting, a woman with gloves, may hint at one of Freud's key examples of the fetish, perhaps suggesting that the painting's effect is to obscure the mother's 'castration' rather than to evoke real presence or otherness. Also, Freddie's descriptions of the painting seem to undermine the ideal unity of visual form. As Müller observes, Freddie's first description of the painting describes the represented woman in an "anatomized" or synecdochal way (190), so that his description unavoidably undermines his ideal of visual "wholeness" or the effectiveness of the fetish. His second description of the painting, which initially seems authoritative and referential, turns out to be second-hand: "I am quoting from the guidebook to Whitewater House" (104). The third description, in which he invents the narrative behind the creation of the painting, is problematic too, since in it he identifies both with the gaze of the artist and with the woman's experience of being looked at and transformed into a work of art. The painted woman even experiences looking at her own portrait as a moment of suspended turning in the same way that Freddie experiences it: "so taken is she by the mere sensation of stopping like this and turning" (108). However, Müller understands the reversal of the gaze by distinguishing between the gaze and the glance (Müller 190-191). The former implies an ideal, essentially invisible viewing subject, like the subject of linear perspective, while the latter is a self-conscious look, a look that knows its look is being monitored by the other. This, I suggest, takes an optimistic view of Freddie by according him an awareness of a real other.

The similarity between Freddie's experience of looking at the portrait and the imagined experience of the painted woman supports D'hoker's argument that Freddie's experience of the painting is one of reflection – rather than seeing someone other, to whom he is ethically responsible, he sees a version of himself and thus ignores any alterity that the painting may hold (2004a:152-160). This is a persuasive reading for a number of reasons, and the qualified version of it I endorse here is that Freddie's encounter with the painting does involve the narcissistic reflection (or projection, which amounts to the same thing) of his desire through a female other, but that this system is set up to challenge or threaten him at the same time because it is fundamentally masochistic in nature. I will return to the notion of the gaze as an ethical claim in a moment.

The association of a distorted visual perspective with male violence in Freddie's narrative (and in Banville's fiction generally) also resonates with psychoanalytic film criticism that understands the male gaze as a dominant viewing position constructed by popular Hollywood films. Laura Mulvey's reading of the cinematic gaze to this end is very useful for understanding films or texts in the traditions where the male characters are representatives of mastery, the law, and patriarchal authority. Such male characters provide the audience with a model both for scopophilic enjoyment of the image of the female and ego identification with the man's possession of the woman. This produces two competing effects: first, there is lust based on the instinctive drives, and second, an empathy for the other connected to self-preservation by identification. For Mulvey, it is the tension between these impulses that structures cinematic narrative:

The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of the ego libido. This dichotomy was crucial for Freud. Although he saw the two as interacting and overlaying each other, the tension between instinctual drives and self-preservation polarises in terms of pleasure. But both are formative structures, mechanisms without intrinsic meaning. In themselves they have no signification, unless attached to an idealisation.

Both pursue aims in difference to perceptual reality, and motivate eroticised phantasmagoria that affect the subject's perception of the world to make a mockery of empirical objectivity. (325-26)

This twofold relationship to the female image is clearly a factor in Banville's art trilogy. In Freddie's aesthetic experiences and his 'interpretation' of various paintings, there is a self-conscious and parodic incorporation of the kind of visual pleasure Mulvey describes. A detachment from "perceptual reality" is the primary effect of the paintings Freddie encounters, leading to his murder of Josie Bell, and his error in authenticating the paintings in *Athena*. In Banville's novels, however, readers identify with the male narrator despite his advertised lack of mastery and his perpetual inability to 'possess' the woman he desires. The 'voice' of Banville's fiction follows Kafka and Beckett in inviting a pleasurable identification with a male character who cannot live up to the ideal of the law, and who must repeatedly confess to this inadequacy. Banville also has Freddie anticipate possible Freudian readings of his crime by describing "wanting to kill [my father], so that I might marry my mother, a novel and compelling notion which my counsel urges on me frequently, with a meaning look in his eye" (30). This piece of self-analysis might suggest that his desire for the woman in the painting stands in for the oedipal desire for the mother, but the fact that Freddie himself suggests it connects such interpretation with further excuse-making and the sense that Freddie writes as a way of "amusing myself, musing, losing myself in a welter of words" (38). Banville's presentation of the male gaze challenges Mulvey's Freudian perspective on identification and the creation of narrative tension, making it possible to see his work as moving away from such a perspective to one that enables readerly identification with an apparently powerless or 'bewildered' masculinity. This is not to say that Banville's art trilogy is in some way subversive of the 'sadistic' gaze psychoanalytic theory describes. If anything, it leads us to Mansfield's understanding of masochism as the contemporary form of masculinity that "wants to exercise its power, but it no longer wants to admit to being powerful" (2000:93).

In his first encounter with *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*, Freddie has the uneasy sense that the woman in the painting subjects him to her gaze, and that the entire visual field is focused upon her (or the painting) as the subject of vision:

At the far end of the room a french window stood wide-open, and a gauze curtain billowed in the breeze. Outside there was a long slope of lawn, whereon, in the middle distance, a lone heraldic horse was prancing. Farther off was the river bend, the water whitening in the shallows, and beyond that there were trees, and then vague mountains and then the limitless, gilded blue of summer. It struck me that the perspective of this scene was wrong somehow. Things seemed not to recede as they should, but to be arrayed before me – the furniture, the open window, the lawn and river and far-off mountains – as if they were not being looked at but were themselves looking, intent upon a vanishing-point here, inside the room. I turned then, and saw myself turning as I turned, as I seem to myself to be turning still, as I sometimes imagine I shall be turning always, as if this might be my punishment, my damnation, just this breathless, blurred, eternal turning towards her. (77-78)

The vanishing point, that device which gives the perspective painting its centre and secures the viewing subject's position of mastery over the painting, is now not in the painting, but may be focused on Freddie (and on the idea of the subject). It is not simply that he takes the woman in the painting to be real, for the whole painting takes on an unsettling gaze: "It was not just the woman's painted stare that watched me. Everything in that picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly" (79). There is a reversal between viewing subject and object, and Freddie feels that his perspective is entirely overthrown by that of the painting. The reversal puts the spotlight on interiority, as the privileged position of the viewing and knowing subject is scrutinised by the spatialization and structuring effect of linear perspective. However, this

challenging gaze is intensified through the Romantic idealisation of stasis within movement, the “still moment” which provides epiphany and revelations of sublime insight, presented here as Freddie’s sense of an “eternal turning,” and therefore does not seem entirely unwelcome.

In Chapter One I discussed Freddie’s experience of turning to view the painting in terms of interpellation, in which subject formation is figured as a recognition of the self through being addressed by the other. Here I would suggest that this turn upon the self—or turn to an object that reflects the self back on itself in a kind of closed circuit—takes on the structure of the sublime, and the resulting simultaneous subjection and subjectivation is an expression of masochistic power relations. This idealisation of the silent, static image (and the accompanying fervor for supplementing this silence and stasis with words) normally implies a subjectivity commensurate with the idea of linear perspective in painting and objective narrative of the past (historical ordering, the referential function, and arrangement of evidence) in writing. However, Freddie does not command the linear perspective of the painting, and this emphasises his (essentially self-created) loss of subjective control. Just like his realisation, when reading, that he “had in fact got the whole thing arse-ways,” and “would be compelled at once to execute a somersault, quick as a flash, and tell myself, I mean my other self, that stern interior sergeant, that what was being said was true” (17), the visual structure enables him to control his desire by playing the role of the other. This narcissistic scene of aesthetic interpellation is closely related to Freddie’s social relations with women as well: turning towards the woman in the painting becomes the opposite of turning away from his wife, Daphne, and turning away from Josie Bell, the maid he says he is able to kill because of a “failure of imagination” (215).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This phrase features in the description of Freddie and Daphne’s first meeting: “I had just that glimpse of her and then I turned away . . . I would spend the next fifteen years turning away from her” (20). As a comparison, when he is about to club Josie, Freddie notes, “I turned to her. I had the hammer in my hand” (113). After he strikes her for the second time, she “closed her eyes and turned her face away from me” (114). Related to this pattern is the dualistic structure of Freddie’s relationship to Daphne and Anna Behrens. Their *ménage-à-trois*, which Freddie sees as essentially excluding him, is an example of the triangular structure of erotic relationships discussed by Patricia Coughlan (2006). These structures establish erotic desire and ideas about gender identity as fundamental to the ways in which Banville problematises his protagonists’ experience of art and social relations.

The reversal of visual perspective is, therefore, part of his excuse, for if the narrative “I” is no longer an autonomous agent, or emerges from the cave of representation in a disoriented and emasculated state, he cannot be held accountable for its actions in the usual way.

The ethical problems raised by following de Man’s radical reading of confessional writing are obvious. The politics of “radical fictionality” and the excuse lie on a slippery slope, for if subjective agency is subordinated to the “text-machine” of language then, as de Man acknowledges (1979:299), it quickly becomes possible to excuse just about anything. This raises questions about how and to what extent, to paraphrase Rousseau, a “pure fiction” can concern justice. While Freddie claims he can not excuse himself nor ask that he or his fellow inmates be absolved, he does suggest that their powerlessness is in some sense unjust or pitiable. Like Rousseau, Freddie presents himself as somewhat helpless before his own desires, and seems to connect the problem of the absence of a language of referentiality (which is what gives rise to the excuse) with a forlorn masculine subjectivity. After all, Freddie writes from a prison cell which may be a metaphorical prison-house of language, but it is also a prison in which men share a decline in their masculinity:

Something essential has gone, the stuffing has been knocked out of us. We are not exactly men any more. Old lags, fellows who have committed some really impressive crimes, sashay about the place like dowagers, pale, soft, pigeon-chested, big in the beam. They squabble over library books, some of them even knit . . . they are so sad, so vulnerable, these muggers, these rapists, these baby-batterers. (6-7)

The prison also doubles as a metaphor for determinism, for while Freddie claims his actions as his own, he suggests he could not have chosen to act otherwise. He and the other inmates even ponder “whether it is feasible to hold onto the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned” (16). Moreover, the determinism Freddie claims has

shaped his life is portrayed in terms that highlight his failed ambitions to organise his life around “something essential,” to create the foundation or structure he idealised when he was younger: “I saw myself as a masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice around myself . . . which would contain me utterly and yet wherein I would be free” (16). At one time he studied mathematics in order to “make the lack of certainty more manageable” (18), but, like Ibsen’s master builder, Freddie’s home and family are eventually sacrificed to his ambition, and he ends up feeling “unhoused . . . at once exposed and invisible” (16). In Ibsen’s play, as in *The Book of Evidence*, desire for power of mastery of one’s chosen field is linked to heterosexual desire and self-delusion.

Many of the elements of Freddie’s narrative and his construction of an excuse connect his loss of control and understanding of his life with his gender, but they always do so in an intentional and not an ‘unconscious’ way. When Freddie dismisses the possible excuse, suggested to him by his counsel, of an unresolved Oedipus complex (29-30), it may be because such a theory would detract from his more conscious and active methods of controlling desire. In other words, denying obvious routes to exculpation are not ‘alternative’ interpretations but a proliferation of possibilities for his excuse. When his mother tells him about the minor stroke she has suffered and Joanne embraces and comforts her, Freddie is prompted to ask “if man is a sick animal, an insane animal, as I have reason to believe, then how account for these small, unbidden gestures of kindness and of care?” (49). His appeal to the judge following this question is about “people of our kind” (49); this “kind” is not specified but given Freddie’s lack of kindred or familial bonds, he may be referring to men as sick and insane and women as the only ones capable of kindness and care. After all, “Man is a sick animal” comes from Nietzsche’s description of the ascetic ideal in human beings which, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tends to mean men who have developed a form of self-denying subjectivity essential to Nietzsche’s

account of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> This will to power is expressed as a denial of love and care for the other and a denial of social and familial relations insofar as it is a product self-control that operates by perpetuating a space of desire in which intellectual mastery is made possible. In this context, perhaps the murder of Josie Bell, even though it is framed as an unveiling—with Freddie saying “I was filled with a kind of wonder. I had never felt another’s presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her” (113)—is really the violence of an ascetic, epistemological drive against the life-affirming communities between families, and especially between men and women. In any case, we should not forget that Freddie’s weapon of choice, the hammer, was also Nietzsche’s.<sup>11</sup>

De Man argues that the machinic dimension of language deconstructs the “figural dimension” of the text as body. This bears directly on the excuse, since he argues that it is the text-machine that produces the subject and “its train of psychic consequences” (1979:299). He also suggests that Rousseau is aware of the text as a ‘machine’ and that figures of the machine “[seduce] him into close contact” (298) as they displace “all other significations and [become] the *raison d’être* of the text” (298). Banville’s description of Freddie spotting the hammer suggests a similar kind of seduction: “One moulded, polished piece of stainless steel, like a bone from the thigh of some swift animal, with a velvety, black rubber grip and a blued head and claw. I am utterly unhandy, I do not think I could drive a nail straight, but I confess I had always harboured a secret desire to have a hammer like that” (BE 97). If we follow de Man’s radical reason for the existence of the excuse, then *The Book of Evidence* stages the violent con-

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche’s description of asceticism, from which the phrase “Man is a sick animal” comes, is particularly relevant given its similarities to masochistic subjectivity. He argues that an “ascetic life is a contradiction in terms: a particular kind of *ressentiment* rules there, that of an unsatisfied instinct and will to power which seeks not to master some isolated aspect of life but rather life itself, its deepest, strongest, most fundamental conditions; an attempt is made to use strength to dam up the very source of strength; a green and cunning gaze is directed against thriving physiological growth, especially against its expression, beauty, joy; while a pleasure is felt and *sought* in failure, atrophy, pain, accident, ugliness, arbitrary atonements, self-denial, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice” (1996:97; original emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the idols and other writings* (eds.) Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).



frontation of the text as machine and the text as body, in which the latter is brutally dispatched. Freddie's unhandiness would thereby be refuted both in the practical and philosophical senses.

Thus far I have argued that the presentation of masculinity defined by a failure to know (or to possess) the object of its desire fits perfectly with the sublime visual structure Freddie creates in his account of *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*. The impossibility of visual mastery also provides the basis for the excuse as it seems to influence him to act beyond his control. However, such excuse-making is at the opposite end of the spectrum from readings of *The Book of Evidence* which emphasise the self's encounter with, and ethical recognition of, the other. In discussing Freddie's aesthetic response to the painting as an excuse, I have said little about the murder of Josie Bell – which is, after all, the event that requires and gives rise to his narrative and its character as excuse. Freddie's over-valuation of the painting and his relative lack of interest in Josie suggests a failure to recognise and respect the other, while the similarity in the way he describes Josie and the woman in the painting implies a conflation of the experience of confronting art and the experience of confronting the other. In connection with this, I want to consider two representatives of ethical criticism: Kim Worthington and Elke D'hoker, who both discuss the ethical implications of *The Book of Evidence*. Worthington emphasises humanist accounts of subjective agency and ethical responsibility and thus sees Freddie's entire narrative as a devious excuse of poststructuralist posturing. D'hoker finds neither neo-humanist nor poststructuralist models of textual ethics fit *The Book of Evidence* perfectly, and offers an alternative reading.

Worthington's argument is of interest because it attempts to refute Freddie's excuses and accuses him of attempting to reduce "the intersubjective, linguistic constitution of personhood to a despairing vision of the human subject as an inauthentic social text, constituted and subdued by the violent authority of the word" (1996:199). Although she does not mention him, de Man's philosophy of language would presumably be the perfect example of the "hyperbolic claims of some aspects of deconstructive theory to conceptions of personhood"

(198) to which she objects. Worthington argues against a notion of the subject described by poststructuralism, which she regards as the deplorable abandonment of meaning and humanist values. Unfortunately, her immunity to irony is considerable, which enables her to read many instances of confessional performativity as earnest rhetoric rather than as self-reflexive commentary on a process of subject formation.

A good example of this is Worthington's treatment of the novel's opening sentence, which reads "My lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say" (BE 3). Worthington comments that "[b]y framing his address within the conventions of the law (and perhaps of religion—'My Lord' is suggestive of prayer or confession), Freddie hopes to secure the veracity of his speech, to accord to his story the status of history" (211). She misses the ironic intention of this sentence, which is to subvert the referential function of proper confession and legal testimony by showing that Freddie's "own words" are a performative utterance that will only ever offer excuses rather than the truth. Freddie does not so much claim an ultimate alienation or separation from community as provide a narrative demonstration of the complexity of telling the truth about oneself, and of how power structures that inevitably play a role in every individual's life—legal, communal, epistemological and ethical—can be managed and even subverted in a limited way. Thus Worthington's view that *The Book of Evidence* presents "calculated deviance within community while feigning excommunication (and irresponsible detachment) from the constraints of rational placement" (206) is not so different from reading Freddie as a masochistic subject; but to reduce Freddie's narrative to a banal referential statement of excuse ignores the interaction of desire and performative language, and may be to miss its true ethical implications. Even if Worthington's argument misses its mark in this respect,<sup>12</sup> however, her commitment to real ethical and political consequences

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<sup>12</sup> There are also a number of factual errors which detract from Worthington's version of *The Book of Evidence*. Holyhead, for instance, seems to have been relocated across the Irish sea to become Freddie's hometown (222), and at another point she has Freddie travelling by train when in the novel he travels by bus (209). Such disorientation is ironic given that Worthington argues for the necessity of communal and moral "maps of self" in response to Freddie's apparent subjective alienation.

cannot be ignored.

Elke D'hoker's discussion of ethics in *Visions of Alterity* (2004a) balances neo-humanist and poststructuralist accounts of the ethics of reading, but finds that the latter, although useful, is no closer to explaining Freddie's "failure of imagination." In particular, D'hoker compares the terms in which Freddie describes his encounter with the painting and the maid he kills to ideas about an ethical relation to the other put forward by Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, whose work has been influential among poststructuralist critics, an encounter with the other entails an ethical obligation: the "task of respecting the alterity of the other, of letting the other live – as other" (D'hoker 147). The essay by Derek Attridge that D'hoker draws on in her discussion of Levinas elaborates on the relation between (literary) creativity or "invention" and the relation of the self to the other. Attridge outlines how the encounter between self and other demands "the acknowledgement of the other's uniqueness" and so signals the "impossibility of finding general rules and schemata to fully account for him or her." The consequence of the unique particularity of the other is that the apparent difference between the other as "other people" and the other as it is experienced as the unthought or unthinkable in the mind, breaks down. This is because when we encounter the other, "the experience is an encounter with the limits of one's powers to think and to judge, a challenge to one's capacities as a rational agent" (Attridge 1999:24).<sup>13</sup>

For Attridge, the subject's relation to the other will be tentative and partial (in both senses of the word), since (following Levinas) he understands this relation as the uncomprehensible yet constitutive field of the subject. An ethical consideration of the relation between self and other involves an undecideability as to which comes first: "We may say that the other's arrival destabilizes the field of the same or that the same occasions the arrival of the other; both these statements are true, though each is incomplete without its counterpart" (21). To speak of the other is to speak of a relation, so the 'arrival' of the other is most sensitively ren-

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<sup>13</sup> The date of this article is incorrectly cited as 1990 in D'hoker's footnote (D'hoker 2004:148, n.5)

dered as the experience of a limit, or the re-drawing of a limit: “the other as other to is always and constitutively on the point of turning from the unknown into the known” (22). This is not, Attridge points out, what happens when the other is (violently or otherwise) appropriated to the same, for that ignores the difference of the other, and indeed misunderstands the same or self as constituted without the other, which is not the case. Rather, this figure of turning articulates the process in which the same is changed by its contact with and incorporation of some element of the other (at the same time as the other will be changed by the same but remain other). In the context of this study, this figure of turning seems to parallel the visual structure Freddie creates in relation to the painting. Like the scene of interpellation mentioned in Chapter One, to which Freddie’s encounter with the painting also bears a similarity, such a turning provides a figure for the ambivalence of the subject’s relation to the other: the power of the other is that it is unknown and exterior, but its influence is itself empowering since it enables the process of self-definition and awareness. Although the Levinasian relation to the other is prior to the formed social field of interpellation, it seems to call the subject into being in a very similar way. As Attridge sees it, the subject has a responsibility to the other that is a powerful obligation: “Responsibility for the other involves assuming the other’s needs, being willing to be called to account for the other, surrendering one’s goals and desires in deference to the other’s” (27). This is a responsibility *for* the other rather than a responsibility *to* the other: responsibility for the other may be an obligation the self welcomes, or even partly generates, as in the phrase ‘to take it upon oneself.’

D’hoker does not consider this notion of responsibility in great depth, for she need not look far to conclude that Freddie is either blind to the other or is committed to an isolation of self that imagines it can ignore or ‘overcome’ the other. As an alternative, she argues that Freddie’s encounter with the painting can be read as a reflection of himself. She notes the similarity between Freddie’s feelings of being looked at by the painting and the imagined experience of the woman being painted, and points out that “Freddie understands her as ex-

periencing the same dividedness and alienation he himself records throughout his narrative” (154). D’hoker argues that, as a reflection or projection of Freddie, the painting of the woman is simply another in a long series of doubles that Banville creates for him; it even becomes possible to understand Josie as a double as well, despite the awareness of her as other that he seems to describe.

For D’hoker, then, the murder is explained by the sudden loss of the figures which “serve the double purpose of both containing these women in Freddie’s artistic categories and stripping them of their threatening physicality” (159). She also suggests that Josie’s body becomes a threatening physical presence during their struggle which, like so many other images of femininity in Banville’s oeuvre, “is experienced as threatening by the male ego because of the notions of excess and death, which it is traditionally taken to imply” (158). D’hoker is correct that the materiality of the female body is presented as a threat, but in this case it is complicated by the fact that it is also an inspiration. Freddie’s awareness of Josie, with her “mousy hair” and “bad skin,” as “quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don’t know – somehow radiant” (113) seems to inspire him but does not prevent him from killing her. Therefore, we cannot base the murder on an aesthetic self-mirroring occasionally punctured by an awareness of abject materiality.

If we read the episode of the painting and the murder of Josie Bell in terms of the visual and verbal ‘prison’ Freddie has constructed as his excuse and with the masochistic model of subjectivity in mind, the self-fragmentation Freddie narrates—which enables him to identify both with the woman as the object of an artistic gaze and with the artist who paints her—can be read as a dramatisation that controls and asserts a masculine identity through putting that identity on trial and entrapping it within a sublime aesthetic. Without doubt the proliferation of doubles and self-mirroring in Banville’s fiction is a “by-product of the fear of alterity, physicality and finitude haunting all of Banville’s protagonists” (D’hoker 2004a:193), but this is managed by incorporating versions of the (feminine) other within the self, and thereby controlling

the threat this poses. D'hoker's suggestion that Andrew Webber's notion of the "autosopic, or self-seeing" subject (D'hoker 2004a:175) allows Freddie to see himself in a variety of ways as he "separates himself into subject and object, perceiver and perceived, and, quite often, mind and body" (176) is particularly useful for understanding this self-management. However, the masochistic subject returns us once more to the question of the ethical relation to the other: is ethical responsibility open to subversion by the politics of masochism?

The notion of responsibility does seem to be important, even necessary, to an account of Freddie as a masochistic or "sublime" subject, but D'hoker's overstatements about "Freddie's tragic inability to tell apart fact from fiction" (2004a:185) simply return us to Worthington's straw-man excommunicated "poststructuralist" subject. If responsibility to the other is in fact hijacked by Freddie's violence it is surely not reinstated in his subsequent notion of atonement: "my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. How am I to make it come about, this act of parturition? . . . I am big with possibilities. I am living for two" (*BE* 215-6). Although there are similarities between Freddie's imagined pregnancy and the responsibility to the other, the fact that Freddie's imagination is governed by the associative domain of gender differences suggests that his atonement will not be open to the other *as other*, but will happily assume responsibility for an other that is in fact an aspect of the same or self. Attridge's link to the creative process and writing in particular reinforces the sense in which Freddie's assumption of "responsibility" enables him to perpetuate the space of desire that is the text: describing the writer's relation to the other as a relation to the unthought, or the unwritten, "is one way of indicating the strange compulsion involved in creative behaviour, a compulsion that is manifest in a minor way as I grope for sentences to articulate ideas" (Attridge 27). Thus Freddie makes responsibility function as the inverse of the excuse: while the latter claims a suspension of agency in the face of art, a failure or bypassing of the subject in relation to the other, the former returns the subject to its infinite obligation for the other and its primary guilt. Like

the excuse, this responsibility cannot be made referential and so cannot be proven, but its performative dimension allows for the supererogatory identifications and self-dramatisation of the masochistic subject.

## 5.2 Art as Escape: *Ghosts*

*But before I go I should like to find a hole in the wall behind which so much goes on, such extraordinary things, and often coloured. One last glimpse and I feel I could slip away as happy as if I were embarking for—I nearly said Cythera, decidedly it is time for this to stop.*<sup>14</sup>

*Ghosts* continues the distinction between performative and referential language that was central to the confessional mode in *The Book of Evidence* by narrating Freddie's release from prison, his ongoing guilt and the apparent lack of cause or explanation for the shape his life has taken.<sup>15</sup> Quoting Gide's *The Immoralist*, Freddie finds that "objectless liberty is a burden" (G 195) to him, and suggests his release is simply the beginning of a lifetime of guilty remembrance. In the second section of the novel, en route to the island where he will live on parole, he catches a ride south with Billy, a one-time fellow inmate, who seems to have found his feet since leaving prison. When Billy confesses to having lied about his life since leaving prison, Freddie is disappointed not at the dishonesty but at the effect of the banal truth:

truth, so-called, is a much overrated quantity. The trouble with it is that it is closed: when you tell the truth, that's the end of it; lies, on the other hand, ramify in all sorts of unexpected directions, complicating things, knotting them up in themselves, thickening the texture of life. Lying makes a dull world more interesting. To lie is to create. (190-1)

As in *The Book of Evidence*, referential and instrumental language is considered ineffectual. Lies and other inventions are preferable because they create possibilities that allow identity to

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett. *Malone Dies*, 237.

<sup>15</sup> Although he is never named outright as Freddie Montgomery, critics identify the narrator as the same character since his past conforms perfectly to the events of *The Book of Evidence*. In *Athena*, we assume the main character to be Freddie as well, though he calls himself Morrow in that novel; both texts also include allusions to H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* that refer us back to the name Montgomery (G 115; A 7).



be continuously revised. They also involve a certain heightened obligation to the other: one must keep elaborating on the lies one tells or the identity one creates in order to maintain the relation between speaker and hearer or writer and reader. In this section of *Ghosts*, prison and confession are still closely associated with a referential demand or judgment, and with determining the relations between subject and object. Freddie's writing contrasts with this demand and subverts it, thereby creating a source of revitalising affect and complexity. Freddie also connects imprisonment with emasculation: "I have a theory, mock me if you will, that modern penal practice aims not to punish the miscreant, or even to instill in him a moral sense, but rather seeks to emasculate him by a process of enervation" (32). In *The Book of Evidence*, the genius of the excuse was that it could open up a discrepancy between reference and performance through its supererogatory claims of faithfulness to truth, thereby making the contradiction at the heart of confession into a source of pleasure. This slippage within confessional self-reference defined itself against instrumental language and the atmosphere of oppressive care Freddie experienced in prison, the attenuation of the senses that may be due to the "the stuff they are said to put in our tea to dull the libido" (BE 6). But if Freddie is now free from the referential and confessional demand of the penal system, *Ghosts* must supply a new antagonistic representational mode or structure through which he can define himself as a narrative subject.

This new element is introduced in the first, third and fourth sections of *Ghosts* which enclose the extension of Freddie's story in a different kind of text. These sections create a self-consciously fictional space full of just the sort of colourful goings on that Malone might imagine through his hole in the wall. Freddie is living on an island where he works as the amanuensis of Professor Silas Kreutznaer, a crusty art historian who also seems to be hiding a guilty past, and the professor's long suffering assistant Licht. It is an odd island, constructed

out of literary references and painted scenery to reflect Freddie's tastes and sense of irony.<sup>16</sup> The novel opens with Freddie's description of the arrival on the island of a group of "castaways," day-trippers who get stuck on the island when the ferry hits a sandbar. They are ghosts, or at least partake in the ghostly: the opening exclamations include "List!" and "Listen," as in Hamlet's meeting with the ghost of his father. There is an uncanny similarity between these castaways and the figures in a painting Freddie is studying, and this provides the central paradox of the novel. The painting in question, *Le Monde d'Or*, is another work held at the Behrens residence, Whitewater House, the scene of Freddie's crime in *The Book of Evidence*. It is attributed to the mysterious Vaublin,<sup>17</sup> a figure based loosely on the French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721). The name Vaublin, and its multiple variants (van Hobelijn, Faubelin etc), which appear again in *Athena*, are anagrams or near anagrams of the author's name. The professor is writing a book on Vaublin, but has assigned the project almost entirely to Freddie, who becomes, appropriately, his ghost-writer. Freddie blurs the distinction between the narrative world and the world supposedly inside the painting and in doing so seeks to place himself in an indeterminate zone: he aims to exist neither in the painting, nor outside it but would be "something in between; some third thing" (29).

*Le Monde d'Or* is based on Watteau's paintings *L'embarquement de Cythere* (1717), and *Pelerinage a Cythere* (1718). The paintings are two versions of the same scene, which shows groups of adults and children reluctantly leaving a clearing and walking down to a ship, attended by cherubs. The doubleness of Banville's reference counfounds the question of an

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<sup>16</sup> Recording all the literary hints and allusions Banville weaves into his texts is a task beyond the scope of any single study, but it is worth noting here that as well as the references to Cythera Freddie's island is a pastiche of many literary islands, including those of Robinson Crusoe ("Defoe's time in Newgate prison, and the apparitions that came to him there, parallel the experience of the narrator [Freddie]" (Schwenger 24), a link also signalled by the name Kreutznaer, and Licht's spyglass sighting of "Vertical sheep" (5)); Prospero's musical island in *The Tempest* (6, 23); Aeaea, Circe's isle (7); Swift's Laputa (34), and Wells's island of Dr Moreau.

<sup>17</sup> Banville published a "biographical sketch" of Vaublin, which formed the basis for the life of Vaublin in *Ghosts*. In it Vaublin is working on a painting titled *Embarquement pour l'île d'amour*, begun in Paris in the context of "the deportation of wives for the colonists in Louisiana. Women had been rounded up from the stews and the prisons and given a cotton shift and put on board ship in hundreds at the quayside below his windows" (228). See John Banville, "Life and Art." *Granta* 1992: 219-31.

“original” source from the outset (in fact, because *Le Monde d’Or* also includes the figure of Pierrot, painted by Watteau as *Gilles*, it refers to at least three paintings by Watteau). The first version of Cythera has a distant ethereal mountainous background and a melancholy atmosphere, while the second version shows a cheery blue sky. The question of whether the pilgrims are already in Cythera and must leave, or whether they are in their ‘normal’ world from which they are about to depart is not entirely clear, in part because of the conflicting titles, though the scene seems to suggest the figures are leaving. Cythera, the isle of love, is reputedly the birthplace of Venus, and there is a statue of her in the clearing at the right of the painting. She is a broken figure draped with wreaths and flowers in the darker first version, but is a complete work of art in the brighter, second version. This statue may also be the inspiration for Banville’s insertion of the figure of Pierrot into the painting. In any case, it presents, in miniature, a beautiful, idealised form contrasted with a broken, mourned form. The significance of this detail will become apparent in the following discussion.

While in *The Book of Evidence* the performative nature of the narrative did not remove the reader from diegetic realism entirely, Banville’s sequel takes a further step away from realism by problematising the existence of the characters who appear in the painting. *Ghosts* is often considered to be Banville’s most postmodern metafiction because it interrogates not only epistemology but also ontology.<sup>18</sup> The novel begins and ends with these ‘unreal’ visitors, and it becomes impossible to decide which is the original: does the narrative mimic the contents of the painting, or are these ‘real people’ at the level of narrative strangely inserted (or misinterpreted) into the painting? The hint that the painting may be a fake only makes searching for authenticity more fruitless, and this impossibility is precisely the point. The elegant distinction Ingo Berensmeyer makes between “worldpictures” and “pictureworlds” (204) elu-

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<sup>18</sup> Brian McHale considers this a defining feature of the difference between modern and postmodern fiction. Although *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), his second book on the topic, sets out to problematise some of the distinctions he made in his earlier book, the focus on world-making and ontology is still central to the stories he tells about postmodernism.

cidates not only the change of focus between the science tetralogy and the trilogy beginning with *The Book of Evidence*, but also the sense in which each of these perspectives is implied in the other. Just as Banville's science novels traced changing relations between scientific work and the broader cultural paradigms which shape the way that work came to be produced, received and therefore 'framed,' *Ghosts* emphasises the problematics of the frame in its visual sense. The indeterminacy of figure and ground that Banville creates in *Ghosts* shows how the stability of the subject as knower rests on a certain formal presupposition, or framing of reality, that removes any illusion of assurance of a stable subject-object relation. In a far more totalising way than *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* attempts to put the visual into words. Yet this totality is divided, as the inside and outside of the visual representation become blurred. Freddie muses that his evocation of the scene in the painting produces "Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic" (55). I will argue that this is because *Ghosts* does not deconstruct the unity of the work of art, or the subject-viewer of works of art, but rather fashions an expanded, contradictory space for the subject to inhabit.

In earlier chapters I considered various ways in which the arrangement of binary thinking follows the logic of what Nick Mansfield calls masochistic indifference. In *Ghosts* this logic operates under the rubric of "image" and "text"; Freddie's desire for a non-difference—to be "here and there, then and now"—echoes the terms usually drawn between the spatiality of visual art and the temporality of poetry or narrative. This interrogation of differences between artistic genres is crucial to the representation of power in Banville's fiction, just as it is crucial in the tropes Sacher-Masoch used to organise power: the masochistic subject idealises a woman for her resemblance to a statue or the framing furs she wears, and then enlists writing—especially the form of binding reference, the contract—to inveigle her into his role-play of dominance and subjection. But Banville attacks this binarism and the subject's relation to power from other directions too, notably in his treatment of memory and mourning. Before

examining the relation between image and text, therefore, I will suggest ways of interpreting suffering and mourning that differ somewhat from current critical perspectives. I suggest that Freddie does not mourn others for their unique difference, but rather he mourns something he has lost within himself, and will connect this internal form of the self-other relation to the ekphrastic impulse. The common element is an attempt to pre-empt or control the prospect of death. *Ghosts*, then, is perhaps Banville's most sustained interrogation of the inward gaze, and his most radical articulation of the splitting or haunting of the self that locks the ideal of subjective unity into a structure that controls it through imagining its loss, division, and contamination.

Just as Worthington criticised *The Book of Evidence* for its apparent disavowal of moral agency, questions about the "loss" of humanity and moral agency of the imagination have been crucial for readers of *Ghosts*. Brendan McNamee outlines a more or less Kantian reading of *Ghosts* when he suggests that Freddie's "integration with nature" ideally allows

a vision of unity that encompasses multiplicity because it recognises the reality of things other than one's self, while simultaneously recognising that it is the human imagination that conveys that reality, or creates it by giving it form . . . This vision may today only exist as an absence, but it is no less vibrant and essential for that (70).

McNamee suggests this unity can be created by visual art (imagination "creates [reality] by giving it form"), which can thereby suggest the 'proper' relationship of the self to the empirical world. When Freddie reflects on his garden he feels that "it must mean something, being here" (G 98), and for a lofty moment sees himself providing the structured consciousness needed for objects to exist: "I am the agent of individuation: in me they find their singularity" (ibid.). However, because of Freddie's lack of imagination, empathy for, or moral consideration of the other, McNamee suggests this unity is replaced by "the pain of psychic exile [Freddie] suffers because of [his] guilt" (70). Freddie considers himself "no unitary thing. I was like nothing so

much as a pack of cards, shuffling into other and yet other versions of myself” (26-27), and his speech becomes a “hopeless glossolalia” (27). Like Worthington’s neo-humanist reading of *The Book of Evidence*, which stressed the priority of social and linguistic conventions as the basis of value and rejected Freddie’s posture of “excommunication” (Worthington 206), McNamee understands Freddie’s inability (or unwillingness) to accept a straightforward, intentional and responsible view of selfhood as the central struggle in *Ghosts*. Yet by turning this reading on its head we can see that Freddie’s exile could exist precisely in order to create suffering and therefore to produce the conditions for his narrative. As we saw with the excuse in *The Book of Evidence*, guilt and confinement can be, in a sense, productive rather than punitive. The conclusion of *Ghosts* confirms that there will be “no riddance” of Felix because he represents the necessary negative principle that enables “progress” in the Faustian narrative; likewise, Freddie exists as a character only through the self-division and alienation that he obsessively describes, ponders and repeats.

Significantly, McNamee understands the displacement of this humanist image of a unified self and world (or, as he argues, a “pre-Socratic” unity) to manifest itself as a particular form of pain. He finds that *Ghosts* presents a paradox, the fact that the “lack of reality felt so intensely by Freddie manifests itself in an acutely painful self-obsession, an obsession that in fact prevents him from seeing the reality of the world” (71). Freddie’s “exile” produces pain, pain causes obsession, and obsession prevents him overcoming exile. What if we reverse this cycle? In the masochistic universe, pain provides access to the intuition of a supersensible rational power, or, in Nick Mansfield’s broader definition of masochistic power relations, it is connected to an aesthetic space for managing the self in its relation to power, creating self-control through a constructed other which functions as an agonist within the self. If McNamee’s “exile” from a unity between self and world is the sustaining principle of a male subject constituted through guilt and suffering, and this leads to self-obsession, and self-obsession causes further pain, which in turn reinforces “exile,” then the reverse of this cycle resembles the structure

of masochism. A quotation McNamee places in his discussion (70) of this issue supports this reading: the masochistic structure is possible because of Freddie's avowal that "there is no getting away from the passionate attachment to self, that I-beam set down in the dead centre of the world and holding the whole rickety edifice in place" (*G* 26). As I discussed in chapter one, Judith Butler's notion of "passionate attachment" is a useful description for the complex relation of the self to power. It involves an understanding of power as both internal and external, both acting upon the subject (as in subjection) and taken up by and for the subject (as in agency). The inevitability of the "passionate attachment to self" precludes a simplistic division between self and other, individual and state, or subjection and agency. These oppositions are inhabited by circularities and counter-flows of identification, whereby the self is redefined/redefines itself through its encounter with the other, or, in the instance I focus on in this thesis, in the production of a contradictory space of agency through identifying with subjection. The quality of suspension or stillness that McNamee argues is an affirmation of human purpose and a "suspension from self-division" (80), is in fact not a direct return, or purposeful drive towards, unity of self and world, though it has a similar effect. Rather, suspension is an aspect of the dramatisation of the masculine subject in a state of inevitable internal conflict. As I have already argued, this drama is best understood through the aesthetic strategies employed in the discourses of masochism and the sublime.

If the worlds within the text "bleed into each other" (55), do they allegorise bodily pain, or do they describe an improperly caulked periphery, "[l]eaky as an unstanch'd wench" (59) as the elderly Croke says of the foundered ferry? The "magic" Freddie experiences in the blurring of text and image suggests that most primal of textual desires: to make the word flesh, to give form and life to inanimate matter. Given Freddie's posturing as a (limited) deity—"Who speaks? I do. Little god" (4)—this transformation has religious as well as aesthetic connotations, including, perhaps, the well-known lines from St John's gospel which Banville

parodied in the opening lines of *Mefisto*.<sup>19</sup> Even more compellingly, a bleed is a typesetter's external border, which brings the materiality of the text and its layout and production to the fore and emphasises that the text and image mutually frame one another and cannot easily be separated into primary and secondary fields of representation. Thus, Banville's labelling of *Ghosts* as a "bleeding chunk" of a novel creates severed edges on all sides because there is no reason for it to "start where it starts and there is certainly no reason for it to end where it ends. It could just go on forever" (Banville 1997:14). It is held together in terms of structure and narrative logic only by the elasticity of Mansfieldian indifference: just as Freddie can produce his text by figuring the self as rupture or incompleteness, the painting motif establishes a lack of closure, and a loss of distinction between its various levels of representation in order, paradoxically, to create a frame as a space of controlled conflict.

Jacques Derrida analyses the complications of delimiting an 'inside' to a work of art and considers the frame as a subject for mourning in *The Truth in Painting*. He argues that the frame does not present a work of art as a pure presence, and he puts this argument into practice by including in his own text a series of spaces delimited by marks that resemble frame corners or bleed marks. These gaps indicate the relation between visual art and writing that is at hand, but also 'support' his claim that questions about the origin or unity of the work of art tend to assume the conclusion they set out to reach by framing it in advance (45), and that the frame can never present a self-sufficient, purely internal meaning that exists without difference. Philosophy requires a clear sense of what is internal and what is external to its objects, and it traditionally relies upon categories of truth and falsehood, and presence and absence in order to decide this sense. Writing, drawing, and mapping objects, systems, or relationships always relies upon the establishment of a stable, blank space into which elements are distinguished as either inside or outside. Derrida considers such questions about origin or

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<sup>19</sup> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:1,14). The opening line of *Mefisto* is: "Chance was in the beginning" (*M* 3).



unity to operate within an idealist philosophical tradition deriving from Plato that valorises the idea or concept as the pinnacle of a hierarchy to which the material object or referent is subordinate and mere representations in art or literature are twice removed (presumably ekphrasis would be at the very bottom of such a hierarchy, three times removed from the Idea). Just as the object of philosophy takes something from the discourse that frames it, the work of art (*ergon*) takes something from the frame (*parergon*) that bounds it. The frame is commonly supposed to sit outside the work, but Derrida argues it acts as a supplement: it is not inside the already complete work but nonetheless adds the limit the work requires; nor is it outside the work because it touches and borders the work – it cuts across the work to form its limit. The function of the frame is not restricted literally to physical frames, but applies to all sorts of borders and supplementary elements.

Joanne Watkiss's discussion of Derridean notions of haunting and mourning in Banville's fiction connects the loss of a stable frame with significant questions about the desire for self-presence. Although Watkiss writes about *The Sea*, much of her argument is relevant to *Ghosts* as well (and to the hallucinations of Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse*). She argues that for Banville, "the importance of the ghost does not lie in its revelation, but the way it is understood (or not understood, as the case maybe). His focus is on hauntings where the ghost does not appear; the haunting of ourselves by ourselves" (Watkiss 2007). Self-haunting is understood here as neither presence nor absence, nor life nor death, but as an experience that occupies a 'ghostly' relation to such binary structures. As I will discuss further in Chapter Six, the revenant allows Banville to deal with questions about the self and the past in a form that admits to neither presence nor absence, and operates somewhere in between the certainty of a realist narrative space and the fanciful play of mere illusion. The revenant is also an "incorporation" of the material into the spirit or idea, a perplexing fusion of mind and matter that exceeds our vocabulary of presence and absence, but that is in common circulation in the idea of the un-

dead.<sup>20</sup> As Watkiss suggests at the outset of her essay, Freddie is interested in discourse with the dead because he might “be able, not to exonerate, but to explain myself, perhaps, to account for my neglectfulness, my failures, the things left unsaid, all those sins against the dead” (83). This seems to refer to his ever-outstanding confessional task and his family who he has clearly neglected. However, the ghosts he sees are not these people to whom he owes a debt, but are figures that may indeed have no relation to material reality – figures that are envisioned in an artwork. For this reason, I argue that Freddie does not mourn the other—or mourn for the other—but rather mourns the self by creating versions of otherness that are contained within an aesthetic frame of self-reference. Haunting describes an experience that is perhaps neither wholly inside nor outside the subject but that confounds this distinction. In Freddie’s (and Banville’s) text, however, this is ultimately exploited in order to re-assert the potential for closing the frame, for closure and unity even as it is figured as self-division or internal conflict, for a re-placing of the limit imagined within the sublime.<sup>21</sup>

Watkiss understands memory and mourning—in *The Sea*, at least—as organised through “mental and physical representations of space [that] intersect in an interrogation of spatial zones” (Watkiss 2007). Although *Ghosts* is not about mourning in for another person like *The Sea*, melancholy and mourning are mentioned many times in the text (*G* 121, 127, 142, 161). The house on the island acts as a spatial structure, which the Professor, Licht and the visitors inhabit and which is the focus point for Freddie’s self-haunting narrative. Much attention is

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<sup>20</sup> One thinks of the chilling physical reactions to the Gothic sublime, and the uneasy, unnameable “thingness” of cultural artefacts that refuse to clearly distinguish between mind and matter. Derrida argues that “the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant*, or the return of the specter” (1994:6).

<sup>21</sup> As Mark Cheetham points out, the sublime can be understood as a “cipher of circumscription” (349) as well as its more usual meaning of a sense of unlimitation. We can most profitably view the sublime as containing both impulses, working in paradoxical ways. This dual character supports Cheetham’s argument that the sublime arises as a conservative impulse to “fix boundaries of genre and discipline during a time of great border anxiety within theoretical discourses” (350), a position that confirms Mansfield’s link between the sublime and a conservative formation of masochistic masculinity.

paid to where characters are in the house, especially the movements upstairs and down and the opportunities these provide for observation and voyeurism.<sup>22</sup> At one point Freddie thinks “*My life is a ruin, an abandoned house, a derelict place*” (54; original emphasis). Similarly, he finds that his old home at Coolgrange “had been emptied of me; I had been exorcised from it” (180), thinking the house empty until he meets Van, his intellectually handicapped son – who is a link to his past but is unable to speak, and thus unable to participate in what is the most important activity to Freddie. On the island, Freddie’s relation to the visitors is as an invisible observer: he tends to disappear when they come to the fore and vice versa (for instance, when Croke meets Pound and Hatch on the hillside above the house, the boys mention that “That fellow,” “Tarzan the apeman” (122) has just disappeared). In a reversal of the Professor’s outward gaze through his spyglass, Freddie seems to see into the house from a privileged viewing-point outside (129).

Watkiss’s discussion of *The Sea* shows how the opposition of the house and the sea suggest the memory archive and its erasure, respectively. In *Ghosts*, too, the house and the sea are set in opposition to one another: the ‘castaways’ arrive from the sea and depart to the sea at the novel’s end, and in between the house functions as a space for Freddie to adorn with his ghostly figures. Freddie acknowledges that the house structures subjectivity: “I live here . . . in these faded rooms, amidst this stillness. And it lives in me” (8). The house is an archive that provides structure to his otherwise “objectless liberty” by creating a spatial orientation that co-ordinates memory. For Watkiss, “[m]ourning prompts memories that are returned to by locating oneself spatially and mentally in moments that have passed” (Watkiss 2007). She also argues that, as archives, the lodging house and picture-house in *The Sea* structure and preserve memories in the manner of Derrida’s notion of the trace, which suggests we can never preserve

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, Licht sees Sophie on the toilet (19), and later Flora alleges that the Professor was trying to spy on her (44, 48). As the ‘castaways’ approach the house Freddie tells us that “Licht spied them from afar” (4), and the Professor is said to often spend his time “idly scanning the horizon through the brass telescope” (4) in his turret room.

the past as a full presence, and must acknowledge the ‘ghostly’ effect of signification that rests upon difference: “The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace” (1982:24). Watkiss therefore understands the sea, which washes away traces, as a site of dissolution and self-loss, but also potentially a source of healing (Watkiss 2007).

*Ghosts* contrasts the arrival of the ‘castaways’ on the island (which, as we have seen, has an air of the mythic, of the ‘placeless’ about it) and the timeless space of *Le Monde d’Or* with Freddie’s largely realistic account of his release from prison and journey to the island. Freddie’s past may not be fully retrievable, but the aesthetic world he creates offers an alternative source of authenticity. Derrida’s discussion of the trace places it centrally within the concepts of consciousness, or awareness of self, and the temporal distinction of the present from past and future. He argues that “[i]n order to describe traces . . . in order to read the traces of “unconscious” traces . . . the language of presence and absence . . . is inadequate” (1982:21). The mode of clear apprehension Freddie idealises is built upon the metaphysics of presence, and especially upon the aesthetic moment that intensifies the present. As Derrida argues,

the subject as consciousness has never manifested itself except as self-presence. The privilege granted to consciousness therefore signifies the privilege granted to the present; and even if one describes the transcendental temporality of consciousness, and at the depth at which Husserl does so, one grants to the “living present” the power of synthesizing traces, and of incessantly reassembling them. (1982:16)

This explains several of the key impulses in *Ghosts*: the contrast between the aestheticised ‘no-place’ of the island and the continuation of Freddie’s confessional narrative; the importance of counter-memory as opposed to historical representation – since the synthesis occurs within the subject, in the writing present, in endlessly re-negotiated formulations of the past; and

the representation of moments of sublime impasse whereby the loss or ‘scattering’ of traces of the past opens up a possible reassembly or renewal. *Ghosts* thus presents a contradiction: it announces its inability to reassemble traces into a self-present meaning, but its valorisation of stillness and suspension in visual art (and the representations of gender which co-ordinates this desire) provides an unrepresentable potential form such presence could take.

The fact remains that Freddie cannot do without some kind of prison, and so imagines himself on Devil’s Island (30); he needs some form of subjection in order to dream of freedom: “[a]nother prison, I was thinking, its walls made of air, and the old self inside me still in its white cell snarling for release” (215). Freddie must remain divided and unable to realise his freedom as self-presence because it is this state that enables him to fix such goals as (im)possible ideals. By being so thoroughly intertwined with the painting Freddie studies, the events on the island in fact allegorise the partial erasure of the trace: the characters and places are made up from other sources – they are intertextual and ‘inter-generic,’ made up of elements that come from elsewhere and cannot be fixed to an ideal, self-present identity. His relation to the world of the painting must be one of impossible desire, and neither can the painting itself live up to the demands of self-presence that Freddie’s mourning effectively creates. For this reason, the sense among the castaways is that they have been to the island before (5, 7, 48), that they are products of a textual repetition without origin.

The ekphrasis of the painting *Le Monde d’Or* that makes up the third section of the novel (225-231) can be read as an attempt to evoke a substitute for self-presence through the permanence of a static scene. The figures in the painting exist, for Freddie, in a world where “nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved,” a world where they live in the “failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant” (231). The characterisation of this stasis as “the failing evening of the self” indicates how the visual representation shores up the ideal of self-presence. Invisible to readers of the

text, the mutual framing of text and image that goes on here cannot create stability for the subject. But it is this very lack of a determinate frame that makes the strategic self-positioning of the masochistic subject possible.

The figure of Pierrot, or Gilles as he is called in Watteau's painting, offers a self-reflexive mask for Freddie (and, it seems, for Banville) as he moves 'between frames.' There is a striking resemblance between Banville's depiction of Pierrot in *Ghosts*, and Louisa Jones's comments on nineteenth century uses of Watteau's subjects:

Writers in nineteenth century France created an iconography all their own around the figure of Watteau and the subjects he painted, particularly the Gilles . . . The imagery which grew up around Watteau and his Gilles was neither stable nor internally consistent, but evolved gradually through time; it drew its coherence not so much from the recurrence of specific themes as from evolving sets of connotations, patterns in the imagery. [Theodore de] Banville, for example, led Watteau's Gilles through many metamorphoses from the white peacock to dying swan; but always the poet viewed him (with quite explicit reference to Watteau) as a white, immobilized figure presiding over festivity without partaking, a figure who assumed more and more the airs of a martyr (7).

Pierrot is a clown character from the *commedia dell'arte*, a form of improvised theatre that developed in Italy during the Renaissance. Appearing in his traditional whiteface and floppy white suit, Pierrot makes his first appearance in Banville's fiction; his subsequent novels contain occasional references to Pierrot and other *commedia dell'arte* characters. Pierrot's character is quite appropriate as a double for Freddie – Freddie leaves jail wearing the white linen suit he was apprehended in ten years earlier, thinking his attire should "both proclaim my shriven state and mark me out as a pariah" (152). But, as we can see from Jones's summary, it may be in the works of French poet Theodore de Banville that Pierrot most resembles the suspended figure in *Le Monde d'Or*, making him a figure of self-reference for John Banville. With

his Pierrot mask, Freddie may seem a martyr to representation, since he is unable to exist in the way he hopes in any of the worlds he has presented to the reader. He describes Pierrot as “mute and solitary, sorrowful, laughable perhaps, and yet unavoidable, hardly present at all and at the same time profoundly, palpably *there*, possessed it seems of a secret knowledge, our victim and our ineluctable judge” (228). However, these multiple versions of the self projected in an aesthetic space that can include contradictions ultimately make it possible for Freddie to control otherness and assert a vision of self defined by self fragmentation, or even by death.

Unsurprisingly, given that he is surrounded by ‘ghosts,’ Freddie repeatedly has the feeling of being in a posthumous state himself, and imagines he might “flow out of [himself] somehow and be as a phantom” (38). This feeling is linked to the uncertainty of the frame by Freddie’s reflection in the figure of Pierrot in *Le Monde d’Or*: like Pierrot Freddie feels “like something suspended in empty air” (37), just as Pierrot is suspended in the painting. Other characters share similar experiences of mourning and the desire for suspension: Sophie, whose life has been affected by war, dreams of “Corpsing” (57), of becoming “inconsequential; she tries to forget herself,” and wishes “to stop, to be still, to be at peace” (ibid.). The links between the frame, mourning and the role of ekphrasis in presenting the visual and spatial in writing are further established when Freddie quotes a passage he has discovered, perhaps during his reading in prison: “*I have an habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence*” (25; original emphasis).<sup>23</sup> John Keats was just two months from his death from tuberculosis when he wrote this, and as the author of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” he is also a key poet of the ekphrastic tradition. But the state of mourning Freddie identifies with here comes before death; it pre-empts death by projecting an aesthetic space that neutralises the boundary between life and death. In *Ghosts* it is not Freddie who is dying, however: it is the Professor, who embodies taste and critical judgment, who is in decline along with the authen-

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<sup>23</sup> John Keats, letter to Charles Brown, 30th Nov, 1820. See *The Letters of John Keats: Volume Two, 1819-1821*. (ed) Hyder Edward Rollins. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1958), 359. In this letter, Keats also asks Charles to write a note to his sister, “who walks about my imagination like a ghost” (360).

ticity of the artworks he studies. To complicate matters further, *Le Monde d'Or* is a product of Vaublin's last days, when "his lungs were ruined" (126)<sup>24</sup> and "a phantasm spawned by fever and exhaustion" (ibid.) convinced him he was being stalked by a "shadowy counterpart" (127) who counterfeited his paintings. So Vaublin echoes Keats as well as being a double of both Freddie and Banville, and death is the 'literary' death that occurs when text is understood as powerless to retrieve self-presence. Although the reality of life's ultimate limit cannot be altered, by situating its narrative in an aesthetic in-between state, *Ghosts* is an attempt to contain death through asserting its 'indifference' from life.

The invented painter, Vaublin, is the ideal artist for this project. He is, Freddie writes, "the painter of absences, of endings. His scenes all seem to hover on the point of vanishing . . . as if seen by someone on his death-bed who has lifted himself up to the window at twilight to look out a last time on a world that he is losing" (35-6). While undoubtedly making another reference to the dying Malone from Beckett's great trilogy, this sense of limitation emphasises that the frame is tied up in the projection and deferral of death. The text-image distinction places Freddie in an inbetween state which is between the supposed closure of painting and the endless *différance* of writing, and between the constructions of gender that are associated with painting and poetry. I will discuss these constructions in a moment.

This masochistic/sublime reading seems a valuable way to understand the complexities of framing the self and the work of art that we find in *Ghosts*. Crucially, Watkiss speculates that "[p]erhaps this is why traces are removed the instant they are created: as a necessity to enable the binary oppositions our western culture depends upon" (Watkiss 2007). As the "simulacra" of meaning and presence are constantly effaced, the binary structures of western thought are necessary (at least insofar as this is the dominant form of philosophical methods) to record and make permanent what is being lost. Conversely, the evaporation of meaning in the trace

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<sup>24</sup> In "Life and Art," Banville has Vaublin "working up close against the canvas, [when] he coughed and stippled a patch of sky with blood" (Banville 1992:231). Vaublin is also thirty three years old, the age of Christ at the crucifixion (227).



enables the binary structure to be mobilised and to do work. This returns us to the question of how to interpret binary structures in Banville's fiction. If we allow that part of the productive capacity of the trace as a diffusion or deferral of meaning is that it can sustain the binary oppositions in an attempt to make the absence of direct, self-present meaning manageable, then it will be possible to allow for a kind of subversion of mourning that only appears to lament the loss of absolute meaning or identity and attempts to recuperate it by creating an aesthetic space in which there is no difference between binary oppositions. This is also the reason I have suggested Banville writes from a counter-memorial, rather than historical, perspective: the fluidity of the self's relation to the past enables a writing which is immanent to the endless deferrals of traces, but which constitutes the desire for a sublime unity through the scattering and deflection of meaning it encounters. The *différance* of the trace may be acknowledged in Banville's texts, but it is circumscribed by the aesthetic dramatisation of the masculine subject. Thus, *Ghosts* is packed full of speculation, memory and mourning precisely because it re-invests in binary oppositions within a space of "indifference": Freddie's mourning does not directly appeal for the recovery of a unified humanist (masculine) subject, but neither does it entirely deconstruct subjectivity by attending to the difference that is an inevitable constituent of identity. Instead it pursues the deconstruction of the frame in order to close it off again; it includes difference by way of crafting an expanded subject that can include all its others within itself and can be subject and object simultaneously.

The images Banville uses connect Freddie's wish for a stable frame with an ideal femininity. In particular, Freddie repeatedly (and self-deprecatingly) formulates his assumption of vision as superior knowledge in terms that align aesthetic and sexual desire. For instance, he claims that, unlike other men, he lusts after "not some sly-eyed wanton but a being made up of stillnesses . . . a pale pool in a shaded glade in which I might bathe my poor throbbing brow and cool its shamefaced fires (I know, I know: the pool, and the lover leaning over it, I too caught that echo)" (80). Ever aware of his transition between images of fragmentation

and unity—here in the figure of Narcissus revelling in his own reflection—Banville does not confine himself to one position or the other but folds them into each other and substitutes them continuously.

W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion of the debate in aesthetics surrounding the relation between texts and visual artworks is headed by an epigraph from William Blake: "Time is male. Space is female" (qtd. in Mitchell 1986:95). If the archive is architectural in Banville's fiction, it is also constructed through the figures of gendered bodies – as was so evident in *Birchwood*. Mitchell has analysed the politics of the differences between images and texts, especially the convention that sees painting as primarily a representation of space or bodies and writing as a representation of time or sequential events established by Lessing's famous work *Laocoon*. In twentieth century criticism, these divisions between poetry and painting have been influential across a variety of critical perspectives, and have been invoked in debates about the politics of the aesthetic, particularly with regard to modernist writing's emphasis on the spatial as opposed to traditional narrative sequence (Mitchell 1986:96-7, 114). Lessing's understanding of the difference between these genres of artistic practice was very similar to Burke's in that gender difference was one of its key markers; for both thinkers, the power of the aesthetic is managed by a relation between the sexes (and vice versa to an equal degree). Mitchell summarises this by stating that for Lessing

Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry. Paintings are confined to the narrow sphere of external display of their bodies and of the space which they ornament, while poems are free to range over an infinite realm of potential action and expression, the domain of time, discourse, and history. (110)

Mitchell argues that Lessing is committed to maintaining “proper sex roles” (109)<sup>25</sup> because of the danger posed to the social order of his day by idolatry (in terms of the linked issues of sex and religion). Similarly, as Derrida points out, what distinguishes the normal parergon from the parergon as “adornment” in Kant’s examples of Greek columns and articles of clothing is the distinction between rational form and seductive matter. If the parergon adds to the inside of the work as a formal element it is acceptable to Kant, but if it is adornment, if it seduces the eye (or the ear)—“more of gilt in it than gold, I fear” (G 243)<sup>26</sup>—rather than maintaining a proper distance, then it perverts its function through “the attraction of sensory matter” (Derrida 1987:64).<sup>27</sup> For Kant, the parergon “ought to remain colorless, deprived of all empirical sensory materiality” (ibid.). Thus the importance of gender and sex to the proper definition of art and its proper relation to the subject and to history cannot be underestimated. I have argued that Banville’s fiction draws on these traditions and that they are central to his dramatisation of male intellectual activity because, whether we look at framing in the actual content of *Le Monde d’Or*, or consider the mutual framing of text and painting that Freddie constructs, the operation of the frame is a performance that strategically presents the male narrator as having lost control. But, this very loss of control opens up a possible recuperation of an ideal, entirely self-present subjectivity.

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Mitchell points out that Lessing’s views were most probably influenced by his father, who wrote a thesis called “*de non commutando sexus habitu*,” which Gombrich translates as “on the impropriety . . . of women wearing men’s clothes and men women’s” (Mitchell 1986:111).

<sup>26</sup> Felix’s punning here reflects the complementarity of fake paintings and the performative dimension of confessional writing. Freddie and the professor are alike in that each has a guilty past and is in some way committed to trying (or *appearing* to try, while benefitting from not trying) to present a performance as an authentic object or act.

<sup>27</sup> In Derrida’s discussion of *différance*, “Le propre” includes “that which is correct” and “that which is one’s own, that which may be owned, that which is legally, correctly owned” (Derrida 1982:4, n1). Thus a proper frame would connote property rights as well as legitimate “disinterested” interpretation, both of which Freddie has ‘disowned’ since first stealing the painting in *The Book of Evidence*. In this respect even his choice of wife comes back to haunt him: “I should have married [Helmut Behrens’] daughter, I would be master [at Whitewater] now, would even have a Vaublin of my very own” (G 211).

What is important in Mitchell's discussion of Lessing is the fact that "[g]enres are not technical definitions but acts of exclusion and appropriation which tend to reify some "significant other" (1986:112). These acts vary historically and within different contexts: the modernist context which is particularly influential on Banville is singled out by Mitchell as a period in which spatial values came to the fore (114). In other words, the text-image difference is structured through the tendency towards binary thinking, and the ways in which it is policed can reveal the underlying gender politics at work. Mitchell considers that there is no essential difference between texts and images as forms of representation, just that they are suited to different tasks. This goes against aestheticians who have held that there is an essential and necessary distinction to be upheld. "The propriety of space and time in painting and poetry is at bottom a matter of the economy of signs, the difference between cheap, easy labor, and costly 'pains and effort'" (102), Mitchell writes. If we accept Wendy Steiner's suggestion that "the literary topos of the still moment is an admission of failure, or of mere figurative success" (Steiner, qtd. in Mitchell 1986:103), then Freddie's "pains and effort" in pursuing such moments in the *Frames* trilogy seems to be a waste of time. But if we understand ekphrasis as a means of making spatial representation in textual form into hard labour, then it makes a good deal of sense in conjunction with the logic of the sublime I have argued is integral to Freddie's attempts to represent self-presence and to craft a counter-memorial relation to the events of his past. As I noted in Chapter One, Tom Furniss argues that the gender politics that support the Burkean sublime also relate to the production of a bourgeois subject who finds authenticity in labour and thus comes to discover his rightful place in the modern social order. If Lessing's distinction between poetry and painting seemed "to remove his argument from the realm of desire, and to ground it in natural necessities" (Mitchell 1986:104), then Banville's treatment of the distinction does the exact opposite: by emphasising the artificial nature of both visual and textual representation and employing traditional gender stereotypes as part of this disavowal, Banville destabilises any natural foundation for these acts while preserving a natural founda-

tion as a negative ideal. He thus positions the relation of the subject to representation as one of always already confounded desire, but does not fundamentally alter the terms of this desire. Rather, *Ghosts* intensifies and maintains the binary structures that it appears to confuse and thus maintains a state of indifference between the terms of those structures. Mitchell speculates that “[p]erhaps we would be better able to listen if we had some other concept of the image to work with besides Lessing’s alternatives—the mute, castrated, aesthetic object, or the phallic loquacious idol” (113). As we will see, these are precisely the categories that *Ghosts* shores up.

Freddie’s attempts to imagine Flora, implicitly as some kind of atonement for murdering Josie Bell in *The Book of Evidence*, cannot be disentangled from his desire for knowledge and power:

I have never had much interest in the flesh. I used to be as red-blooded, or red-eyed, at least, as the next man, but for me that side of things was always secondary to something else for which I cannot find an exact name. Curiosity? No, that is too weak. A sort of lust for knowledge, the passionate desire to delve my way into womanhood and taste the very temper of its being. Dangerous talk, I know. Well, go ahead, misunderstand me, I don’t care. Perhaps I have always wanted to be a woman, perhaps that’s it. If so, I have reached the halfway stage, unsexed poor androgyne that I am become by now. But the girl had nothing to do with this. (G 69-70)

For Freddie, femininity signifies a number of related desires which connect sex with epistemology. Although Freddie does seem to pay a great deal of attention to the flesh at times—“I ogle her bare feet . . . her hard little hands, the vulnerable, veined, milk blue backs of her knees” (94), it is most often, as in this example, in the context of power and vulnerability. This is not necessarily vulnerability to sexual advances; it is more likely that Freddie considers her vulnerable to sight, and thus to knowledge and representation. However, power as sex-

ual violence is partly annexed from Freddie and presented as the domain of Felix – and thus part of the ‘bad’ masculine domain. For instance, Felix and Flora slept together at a hotel on the mainland the night before the trip to the island, and Flora finds him both horrible and exciting (46-47). In contrast to Freddie as Pierrot, Felix is a figure of phallic dominance and manipulation: he “squirmed and groaned on top of her, jabbing at her as if it were a big blunt knife he was sticking into her” (47). For Flora, their relationship has an exciting fantasised sado-masochistic dynamic:

Yes, [Felix] would do anything, be capable of anything. She wanted him to hit her, to beat her to the floor and fall on her and feed his fill on her bleeding mouth. She pictured herself dressed in white sitting at a little seafront café somewhere in Italy or the south of France . . . people glancing at her, wondering who she was as she sat there demurely in her light, expensive frock, squirming a little in tender pain, basking in secret in the slow heat of her hidden bruises (49).

This passage is one of the very few times the narrative enters Flora’s thoughts, and her masochistic desires place her in a curiously similar position to Freddie/Pierrot in relation to masculine phallic dominance. This is evident from Flora’s dream of being trapped inside *Le Monde d’Or*: pursued by Felix and unable to escape, Flora finds refuge at the end of the dream ‘inside’ the figure of Pierrot, “a glimmering figure clad in white, grief-stricken and in pain” (64). Fleeing behind the figure, she finds it “has turned into a hollow tube of heavy cloth, and there is a little ladder inside . . . she climbs the little steps and reaches the hollow mask that is the figure’s face and fits her own face to it and looks out through the eyeholes into the broad, calm distances of the waning day and understands that she is safe at last” (64). This is open to various interpretations, but a strong possibility is that Freddie’s ideal Flora—in other words, the Flora presented in art, not the Flora who in reality wants to escape her holiday job at the hotel on the mainland (239)—is to be understood as simply an aspect of Freddie, or of the mask he projects

into the painting in the form of Pierrot (of course, all the ‘castaways’ can be considered to exist as figures in Freddie’s aesthetic imagination as well as in the setting of the island). But Flora’s dream indicates she is special because she actually inhabits the figure of Pierrot. We also learn in section three that “X-rays [of the painting] show beneath [Pierrot’s] face another face which may be that of a woman. Pentimenti will out” (226). The traces of a female face beneath Pierrot’s might suggest that images of self-presence are possible only by obscuring traces of the other, but in this case it would be more accurate to understand the overlaying of images as an acknowledgement that an ideal self-presence will not be achieved. This is supported by the ironic substitution of pentimento for truth: traces beneath traces and performatives beneath performatives are all that will be found.

The rivalry between Freddie, Felix and Licht for Flora’s attentions is perhaps the main narrative thread of the sections of the novel that take place on the island. Licht is never in with a chance, but Felix is clearly a threat. Sophie and Croke call him “Poison Prick” (52), and, given the prominent role of the Mephistopheles figure in Banville’s fiction, it makes sense to regard the relationship between Freddie and Felix as one of an internal struggle within a single amorphous subject. This is analogous to Mansfield’s discussion of the masochistic structure of power through the example of the action hero and villain who constitute a single, antagonistic, subjectivity in perpetual conflict with itself (2000:97-102). Similarly, it is how I describe the ‘doppelganger’ relationships between the protagonist and a sibling in *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Mefisto*. The role Felix plays as Freddie’s double is further reinforced when Felix mocks the sublimations of art so important to Freddie: when in Flora’s room in the scene discussed above, the narrative reports Felix’s disdain of the merely beautiful: “‘Nice view,’ he said now *and for some reason laughed*. ‘Lovely prospect. Those trees’” (47; emphasis added). Near the very end of the novel Felix offers his own alternative aesthetic scene. Boarding the ship inspires in him memories of sublime arctic scenery, “sailing to the frozen northern pole . . . The tundra and the towering bergs, the sun that never sets: such solitude! such cold! And

yet how beautiful, this land of ice! . . . I saw the strangest sight: a figure, in the distance, on a sled, a giant man, it seemed, with whip and dogs, at great speed travelling on the floes, due north, like us. And then another –” (242). This, of course, alludes to the frame narrative of *Frankenstein*, which Banville also hints at in *The Newton Letter*. As I discussed in chapter three, *Frankenstein* is often read as a study of masculinity and men’s social relationships in which the drive towards isolated (self) creation results in Victor creating a solitary monster who in turn persecutes his creator. Thus Felix seems to indicate that Freddie’s task of imagining the other is predicated on a sublime male solipsism, building on Freddie’s descriptions of himself as both “a manufactured man” (35), and as a giant who frightens himself (238). Freddie admits he is “only at the beginning of this birthing business” (239). Any possible gesture of respect for Flora’s difference, her existence as other, is appropriated by the gender stereotypes of Freddie’s imagination. Thus, he leaves Flora in what he calls his “newly swollen state”—which is open to more than one interpretation—feeling that something significant had changed when Flora asks him to help arrange for her to stay on the island, but immediately likens himself to “the hero in a tale of chivalry commanded to perform a task of rescue and reconciliation” (240). Like Kepler, he imagines himself, perhaps only half seriously, as a “knight of the rosy cross” about to face “the dark one, my dark brother” (G 240).

Gender is important in the processes of memory and mourning in other characters, too. Sophie, who is a photographer, contributes to this collocation of framing and a sense of the declining uniqueness of artworks. Freddie, acting as omniscient narrator, tells the reader that “[t]hings for [Sophie] were not real any longer until they had been filtered through a lens” (G 56), linking her with the removal of the aura of the work of art Walter Benjamin associated with the rise of techniques of mechanical reproduction. As if to emphasise the passing or mourning of the aura, Sophie’s photographic interests lie in capturing the absence and decay rather than the presence of people, as she tells Professor Kreutznaer:

“Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘I have not come to photograph people, only ruins.’ She focused



on his desk, the back of his chair, the window-sills. He listened with faint pleasure to the repeated grainy slither of the shutter working. 'I am making a book,' she said. '*Tableaux morts*: that is the title. What do you think?'" (72)

Alice also senses the ghostliness of the photographic image as repetition, imagining the film inside the camera, containing "dozens of miniature versions of [herself] . . . strangely staring out of empty eye-sockets, and she shivered and felt something approach . . . and touch her" (132). Walter Benjamin associated the aura of art with a relationship of distance, in contrast with modern media which enables images and objects to 'immediately' enter and saturate the time and space of the subject.<sup>28</sup> For Freddie, this loss of the proper distancing of art equates to the devaluation of the present, and this contributes to the frustration and dramatised splitting of the self. Techniques that reproduce images, that make them immediate and concrete and demonstrate the materiality of the subject's relation to history are ostensibly problematic for Freddie, though in fact they add another dimension to his (always failing) idealisation of self-presence.<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted, however, that because it is forgery that is the primary vehicle for presenting the inauthentic in *Ghosts* and *Athena*, the reproduction of the paintings is still linked to human art and creativity, even if it is of a counterfeit nature. This contrast between reproduction and unique artistic creative power is the basis for the ironic twist at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that *Le Monde d'Or* is a fake, possibly painted by the Professor himself (243). The loss of aura is also suggested earlier, such as when Freddie asks

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<sup>28</sup> "We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be . . . It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction . . . To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (Benjamin 1970:224-25).

<sup>29</sup> When Gabriel Godkin discovers a photograph does not confirm his "memory" of his sister in *Birchwood*, he destroys it (B 13).

Who does not know, if only from postcards or the lids of superior chocolate boxes, these scenes suffused with tenderness and melancholy that yet have something harsh in them, something almost inhuman? *Le Monde d'Or* is one of those timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind (G 94-5)

Freddie is thinking of permanence, but his mention of consumer goods bearing such images deflates the possibility that art can regain its mysterious 'significance.' Freddie's investment in the Romantic values of creative genius and imagination are undermined in a variety of ways, but this does not prevent him from enclosing and preserving them in an aesthetic of failure. The other sense of the word reproduction is at stake here too: Freddie continues to describe his task of imaginative atonement for his act of murder as a demand to give life, "to beget a girl" (244).

If Freddie seeks to preserve "the long perspective, the distance, the diminution of things" (G 30), and Sophie represents the mechanical reproduction of images, the differences of gender and sexual orientation that Banville intimates in connection with these issues are also worth noting. Felix, who seems to know everyone's secrets, suggests that Sophie is a lesbian, and is jealous of his relationship with Flora (61). Her leather jacket and the professional way she uses her camera ("she lifted her camera like a gun and shot him" (7)) seem to lend a certain masculine air to her appearance. The Professor is also homosexual and seems to foreshadow the character of Victor Maskell in *The Untouchable*: he even used to be an associate of Anthony Blunt (208). The Professor knows Felix from meetings years before when the Professor was out cruising the streets for sex: Felix was "always there, lord of the streets . . . making little jokes and smiling his malign, insinuating smile. They all knew Felix, with his cartons of contraband cigarettes . . . and his little packets of precious powder" (113). The production and reproduction of images is connected to sexuality, with these versions of sexual desire complicating the desire for authenticity. If it is inauthentic to be homosexual, as these associations seem to suggest, then it is because the 'authentic' experience of art is Freddie's Pygmalion

complex, including the heterosexual drama of masculine desire for an idealised femininity—in *Ghosts*, played by Flora—that ultimately sustains Freddie and enables his narrative to unfold. If Sophie is homosexual then this may also place her on the fringe of the economy that traditionally appropriates traits of masculinity and femininity to embody oppositions such as ideal form and sensory matter, oppositions which are Freddie’s main vehicle for structuring the desiring subject simultaneously in sexual, epistemological and representational terms.

This chapter has argued that Banville’s fiction dramatises a masculine subjectivity that is deeply invested in binary oppositions that are part of the foundations of philosophy – particularly presence and absence and the ideal and material. These oppositions are organised in part through tropes of gender – such as the (traditional) association of the feminine with the sensuous particular and the masculine with abstract rationalism. A specific formulation of dialectic is repeatedly pursued, in which the failure to capture experience in a formal structure and thus synthesise such oppositions results in their intensification and provides a premise for investment in future struggles toward the ideal and in further writing about this very struggle. In *Ghosts* this is achieved through the meanings attached to writing and painting, and the way gender and sexual desire are used as markers in a strategy for representing power as external to the masculine subject. Freddie pursues an essentialist notion of truth and stable ontological foundations by dramatising his failure to realise these notions, and the relationship to power he thereby creates is best understood through Mansfield’s masochistic sublime. All the figures that Freddie projects in *Le Monde d’Or* and on the island are versions or aspects of himself and exist in order to present contradictions and failures within his own ideals of representation and being. The common element that marks this strategy as connected to the masochistic sublime is the use of gender difference and sexuality in constructing the fault-lines along which binary terms are pressed. This applies most importantly to the framing of visual art, both in terms of the deconstruction of the frame Derrida analyses and the traditional policing of gender boundaries that occurs in theories on the differences between texts and images.

### 5.3 Art as Eros: *Athena*

*What is proposed, then, is a portrait—but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.*<sup>30</sup>

*Troilus.*        [...] *This is the monstrosity in love, lady,  
that the will is infinite, and the execution confin'd;  
that the desire is boundless, and the act a slave to limit.*

*Cressida.*      *They say all lovers swear more performance  
than they are able, and yet reserve  
an ability that they never perform. [...]*<sup>31</sup>

Looking back on the completion of *Ghosts*, Banville saw his art trilogy as a frame, or a threshold through which readers would pass, and realised “there had to be a third [novel]. It had to be an arch shape, with *Ghosts* as a kind of central stone. But I’m not sure I was right; maybe *Athena* was one book too many” (Banville 1997:13). Similarly, in the first of the seven ekphrases that punctuate the text of *Athena* and provide ironic comment on the novel proper, the narrator writes of a picture that seems “not quite complete in itself but rather the truncated, final section of a running frieze” (18). Punning here on “freeze” to suggest the ideal of arrested motion that runs through the trilogy, Banville links the incompleteness of the *parergon* with the architectural spaces that are its equivalent insofar as he uses the house throughout his fiction as a topos to locate and interrogate a stable sense of being. The frame or entrance-way

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<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, III. ii. 79–84.

had to be completed, even if this meant that *Athena* is a “truncated” fragment or is “one book too many.”

There were other obvious reasons for a third instalment too: Freddie did not succeed in his purported attempt to atone for the murder of Josie Bell by ‘imagining’ Flora to live in her place in *Ghosts*. Nor can he remain, mourning his loss of essential selfhood, in the “golden world” of *Le Monde d’Or*, so he must continue in his task elsewhere. There is a growing sense that Freddie aims to perpetuate his state of mournful disgrace; as McMinn puts it, *Athena* “confirms the impression that Banville’s fiction is by now wholly self-sustaining and self-generating, that it feeds upon its own rich store of character, landscape and sensibility” (1999:129). As I have argued throughout this chapter, Banville’s fiction sustains itself with performative negations of an ideal subjectivity. Defined through the loss of self-presence and loss of ideal control over representation, this subjectivity is masochistic in structure and can be understood as a strategy whereby, through the logic of the sublime, the forsaken ideals might be controlled. As we will see, *Athena* intensifies this process of negation by centering Freddie’s narrative on a woman who is absent, but who is imagined to embody all the qualities of mystery and desirability that Freddie seeks.

The plot of *Athena* begins when Freddie is enlisted by Morden, who is part of a gang trading in stolen artworks, to authenticate a series of paintings.<sup>32</sup> Almost immediately, he also meets a woman on the street he names only with the letter A., with whom he will fall in love, and who becomes the addressee of his text. Morden’s associate, Francie, is another incarnation of Felix who appeared in *Ghosts* and *Mefisto*, a mephistophelean character who has influence over Freddie, and who compels him to take on the job: “fixed in Francie’s amused, measuring gaze, I had been robbed of all volition” (49). However, this semblance of duress evaporates when we realise Freddie’s strong desire to participate in the events that follow, and, indeed,

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<sup>32</sup> The story is based loosely on a major art robbery that occurred in County Wicklow in 1986. See McMinn 1999:130.

to do his own coercive gazing. Some floors up in an empty building, Morden and Francie lead Freddie to a false wall concealing a secret room. Before entering, Freddie sees through a hole where “the plaster had crumbled in a big, jigsaw-puzzle shape . . . the flash of a stockinged leg and the spiked heel of a slender black shoe” (15). This first glimpse of A. returns us to the visual economy set up in the earlier books of the art trilogy: visual knowledge is the most desirable and powerful form of knowing, but for Freddie it always involves a failure to grasp the seen object that can then be repeated and expanded upon in writing. A. is first spied as a fetishised part-object, in accordance with the fragmented descriptions of Josie Bell and Flora that set these ‘real’ women apart from painted ones in the art trilogy. This anticipates another failure to see wholeness in real people rather than in works of art. Their relationship is framed from the outset as a failure that confounds the assumption of narrative progress towards a truth or resolution and exposes the desire for visual knowledge and a sequential ‘piecing together’ as illusory – signalled by the reference to the jigsaw puzzle. A., of course, is not in the room when they enter, and readers soon surmise that she may be no more real than the woman in the painting in *The Book of Evidence*.

*Athena* is a love letter to a woman who is no more than a letter herself, no more than a capitalised indefinite article. The letter is “not even the initial of her name,” but Freddie finds it appropriate because “of all the ways it can be uttered, from an exclamation of surprise to a moan of pleasure or of pure pain. It will be different every time I say it” (48). She may be the goddess Athena, Aphrodite, or simply language itself. Her signifier is the letter Derrida writes of when he formulates the non-concept of *différance*, from which he argues the differential structure of language, and identities within language, arises. For Derrida, *différance* is unheard, and though it can be made visible in the neologism he coined, it cannot be demonstrated or evoked as a presence: “The *a* of *différance*, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb” (1982:4). In *Athena*, the secret room is an aesthetic space where Freddie examines the paintings and where he and A. conduct their affair, which is characterised by

sado-masochistic role-play. The room is tomb-like (A 2), but is also in a sense consecrated, as in Morden's story about a "centuries old chapel concealed inside the walls" of a "folly down the country somewhere" (ibid.). Consecration is not too strong a word here: describing the day of A.'s departure, Freddie claims to have felt "as the disciples must have felt between Calvary and the rolling aside of the sepulchre stone" (32). His "entombing" of A. locks her, and the difference she represents, into his own fantasy of (im)possible, self-contradictory ascension to the ideal.

Although on some level A. must exist independently of Freddie,<sup>33</sup> his narrative is designed to obscure and enfold such ontological distinctions within itself. Morden's anecdote about the sacred hidden inside the artificial, for instance, raises questions about the claim that *Athena* is a "postmodern novel" (McMinn 1999:134), and these questions have a direct bearing on the issue of A.'s reality (and the reality of A.'s issue). Revealing an awareness of contemporary literary theory, Freddie suggests he "should" view A. as a sign without a referent: "there is no real she, only a set of signs, a series of appearances, a grid of relations between swarming particles" (97). A. could be an analogy for a postmodern idea of being without essence and identity, a contingency founded upon an infinitely complex world of signs and material forces. But Freddie resists this view, certain that he sees an essential being during their love-making, that "she was there at those times, it was she who clutched me to her and cried out" (97). He feels he had pierced a "cloud of unknowing" (ibid.) in his love for her. This last phrase alludes to the 14th century mystical text of the same name which advocates love and embodied experience rather than abstract knowledge as the path to God, and "teaches that God cannot be known by human reason and that in contemplation the soul is conscious of a 'cloud of unknowing'"

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<sup>33</sup> Although it is impossible to be certain, it seems likely when Freddie first sees and follows A. on the street that she is real. Her sudden reappearance behind him (38) seems to be a rupture in narrative consistency that signals his turn to the imagination. The scene of turning here will remind us of the 'turning' scene of interpellation I discussed in relation to *The Book of Evidence*.

between itself and God which can only be penetrated by ‘a sharp dart of love.’”<sup>34</sup>

The continuation of an ideal, secret/sacred meaning is presented in the text of *Athena* both in the image of the secret room and in the form of the ekphrases of the paintings Freddie studies. The final irony of his interpretive efforts is that the seven paintings he examines are fakes, but an eighth painting which he did not examine, *The Birth of Athena*, is authentic. At the level of plot, this means that Morden’s boss, “the Da,” who is the mastermind behind the art heist, manages to smuggle an authentic stolen painting out of the country using several fakes as a diversion. For Freddie it means that despite his poor judgment—or deliberate misrepresentations—in believing the paintings to be genuine there is a hidden authenticity connected to his love for A. To emphasise this, Freddie’s failure to recognise the paintings as fakes resonates with the subject matter of the paintings, which depict scenes of pursuit, desire and transformation inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

Petra Tournay links the mannerist style and use of Ovidian myths (2001, 111) in *Athena* with postmodern playfulness and the deconstruction of any ‘reality’ behind the text. Although her essay provides superb readings of *Athena*, it overlooks the aesthetic of suspension or stasis Banville’s use of the painting motif develops. While her link to Barthes’ notion of textual *jouissance* prefigures my own comments on this topic later in this section, I would take a different position on her argument that “if A. is absent, so also is *Athena*, it is deconstructed into a no-thing. It becomes therefore, another instance illustrative of art-as-failure or language-as-failure” (2001; original emphasis). It is through the failure of Freddie’s art, which is his failure to ‘grasp’ A. and his failure to assess the paintings correctly, that Freddie preserves something of his ideal. Through supererogatory affirmations of absence, loss, and the attenuation of his powers of language, Freddie does not disperse or defer meaning into an endless network of

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<sup>34</sup>“Cloud of Unknowing, The” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Ed. John Bowker. Oxford University Press, 2000. *Oxford Reference Online*. 13 March 2008. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t101.e1608>. Freddie’s application of this idea is ironic as his ‘spiritual’ seriousness leads to acting out his (or A.’s) desires as sexual experiment and perversion.



traces, but instead guarantees a special, idealised aesthetic space where his love might ‘come into being.’ A. might reflect the structure of absence that characterises signification, but this structure is integrated into a sublime totality. Freddie constructs his beloved other (who is therefore really an aspect of himself), and locks her into a relation of unfulfilled desire that is articulated over and over in the paintings and in Freddie’s descriptions of his ideal of arrested movement or suspension. By writing about this impossible desire, the masochistic subject can be seen to constitute its pleasure precisely as open-ended desire. The apparent deconstruction of essentialist meaning and identity is therefore a way of reconstituting subjectivity and managing changing power relations; it is a means to control the alterations to our understanding of language and identity implied by contemporary theory rather than a straightforward statement of them. The paintings also comment directly on Banville’s style and subject matter—the painters’ names are all anagrams or near-anagrams of “John Banville”—and often suggest ways in which the artist’s indulgence in crude sexual imagery has spoiled the “classical arrangement” of the work. For example, in the first painting, *Pursuit of Daphne* by “Johann Livelb,” Freddie notes that we “could have done without that indecent pun between the cleft boughs of the tree and the limbs of the fleeing girl” (19). Similarly, his ekphrasis of the fourth painting, *Syrinx Delivered* by “Job van Hellin,” states: “What a pity the painter has seen fit to set so delicate a figure amidst these swarming and frankly phallic bulrushes” (104-5). Even this tastelessness contributes to the dramatisation of a striving but hopelessly inadequate masculinity.

The myth of the goddess Athena’s birth provides a blueprint for another aspect of the relationship between Freddie and A.—the theme of creativity as parturition—and, as we would expect, it is a story that negotiates gender differences and challenges to patriarchal power structures. The prophecy that the offspring of Zeus and the titan Metis would be more powerful than their father was such a challenge to Zeus that he ate Metis in order to avoid losing his pre-eminence among the gods. Metis was already pregnant, however, and when Athena was born she burst open Zeus’s head and leapt into the world (in another version of the myth,

Hephaestus split open Zeus's aching head with his axe). Athena became a powerful goddess and Zeus survived by pressing his split skull back together. Banville weaves this myth into *Athena* firstly in the sense that the text is written for a woman who exists only in his head, but also by having Freddie mention a spate of murders and that he has been troubled by headaches while he and A. were together. Freddie occasionally makes mention of the mutilated corpses that the police keep turning up, and this acts as a kind of counterpoint to his relationship with A. and his descriptions of the paintings. Freddie even wonders whether they "disturbed something with our wantonness . . . and thus triggered a misfire deep in the synapse maze of that poor wretch, whoever he is, and sent him ravening out into the night with his rope and knife?" (A 4). Banville seems to suggest another double for Freddie, one taking lives while Freddie imagines he is creating one. The myth presents masculine authority as challenged and even split apart by the feminine and the threat that sexual reproduction poses to the established power structure. The mysterious connection between the murders and Freddie's affair with A. also establishes a link between erotic desire and violence that is sublimated in art and mythology but may spill over unconsciously or in some way that is excess to the rationality of his intellectual art history.

These implicit but unexplained connections may account for the strong confessional element present in *Athena* despite the confusing lack of a stable reality on which to base such a confession. Alternatively, the 'secrecy' of the affair may simply reflect its sexual nature and the fact that Freddie writes so explicitly about their sexual relationship despite A. being an illusion, insisting on "betraying [himself] in all [his] horrible self-obsession" (88) when he writes about her. However, understood as a self-consciously performative text (as were his confessions in *The Book of Evidence*) structured around a masochistic narrative subject, Freddie is less betraying himself than controlling the possibilities for fulfilling his desires by presenting them as inauthentic or illusory. An example of this confessional power is found in the early pages of the novel when Freddie's overwhelming sense of loss is established and he writes to

A. in a way that frames himself as the ‘victim’ of her absence:

I feel as I have not felt since I was a lovelorn adolescent, at once bereft and lightened, giddy with relief at your going – you were too *much* for me – and yet assailed by a sorrow so weighty, of so much more consequence than I seem to myself to be, that I stand, no, I kneel before it, speechless in a kind of awe. Even at those times when, sated with its pain, my mind briefly relinquishes the thought of you the sense of loss does not abate, and I go about mentally patting my pockets and peering absently into the shadowed corners of myself, trying to identify what it is that has been misplaced. This is what it must be like to have a wasting illness, this restlessness, this wearied excitement, this perpetual shiver in the blood. There are moments – well, I do not wish to melodramatise, but there are moments, at the twin poles of dusk and dawn especially, when I think I might die of the loss of you, might simply forget myself in my anguish and agitation and step blindly off the edge of the earth and be gone for good. And yet at the same time I feel I have never been so vividly alive, so quick with the sense of things, so exposed in the midst of the world’s seething play of particles, as if I had been flayed of an exquisitely fine protective skin. The rain falls through me silently, like a shower of neutrinos (A 3).

This passage presents Freddie’s loss of A. as a series of contradictions that can only be borne by the sublime. He is “speechless in a kind of awe” in accordance with traditional accounts of the sublime. He is also “sated with . . . pain,” in a sense replete and completely *satisfied* by the pain of his loss. The absence of A. may cause Freddie to forget himself or even die, but at the same time it causes a feeling of being “vividly alive.” The image of whipping and the removal of a “protective skin” recurs several times in Banville’s fiction. *Athena* reinforces the image when Freddie mentally compares himself to Marsyas (184), a reference Banville also used to describe Gabriel Swan’s pain when he awakes in hospital in *Mefisto*. Nicholas Copernicus’s sexual torment and the mockery of his brother Andreas cause him to feel “flayed of a vital

protective skin . . . yearning for what he could not name nor even properly imagine” (24). Max Morden has a dream in *The Sea* that produces a feeling “of having been flayed of yet another layer of protective skin during the night” (25). This image of hyper-sensitivity and vulnerability to sensation invites the Other to appear as a form of violence against the self, and sets up a contrast between sensation and physical proximity as painful and an idealised image of self that can neutralise all such threats. I will discuss this further later in this section, in connection with Barthes’ writing on textual pleasure.

Opened up to a new awareness by his love for A., Freddie is convinced that there is an ideal realm of being created by their love, something “which seemed to overleap the selfish flesh, that seemed to overleap even each other and, quivering, endured, as the arrow endures the bowstring before being transformed into pure flight” (161). Again, this recalls Banville’s use of the same simile to describe the relationship between Andreas and Nicholas in *Doctor Copernicus* (DC 240), and the basic structure of endurance and transformation illuminated by the discussions of the sublime and masochism I have discussed in earlier chapters. The escape from the “selfish flesh” seemingly indicates that Freddie sees love as overcoming individuality and achieving reciprocity, as D’hoker observes (2004a:198). However, it is not clear that Freddie ever actually desires anything beyond the image of “quivering” endurance the image holds: the pun here emphasises that this is a moment of being as immanence in language, suspended “before being transformed,” or as a moment of hesitation on a threshold. Another observation D’hoker makes is telling in this regard: Banville has Freddie adapt a line from Marlowe to read “Come live *in* me . . . and be my love” (A 223; emphasis added), rather than “Come live with me and be my love” (D’hoker 2004a:199).<sup>35</sup> The reciprocity described here will not involve A. as other, but only insofar as we understand her as a cipher through which Freddie performs his

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<sup>35</sup> The imagery of the icy north and a certain vision of creative masculinity Banville borrows from *Frankenstein*, in *The Newton Letter* and *Ghosts* is employed again here at the conclusion of *Athena* to reinforce the monstrosity of his love and “creation” of A: “Now there I stood, in the midst of winter, a forlorn Baron Frankenstein, holding in my hands the cast-off bandages and the cold electrodes and wondering what Alpine fastnesses she was wandering in, what icy wastes she might be traversing” (A 223).

own self-dramatisation, the perpetual internalised conflict of masochistic subjectivity, which creates a discourse of exchange and reciprocity without a real other.

The dramatised loss of A. is also important to Freddie as a lost memory-image. He chastises himself for not retaining a perfect image of her: “At first in the weeks after she had gone I used to torture myself with the thought that I had not observed her closely or carefully enough, that when I still had the opportunity I had not fixed her sufficiently firmly in the frame of memory” (120), but also admits it is not possible to have subjected her to a more intense scrutiny. Through the imperfection of memory, Freddie gains the incentive to repeatedly evoke A. in language, and he takes particular pleasure in the language of physical description (what is in some sense the “ekphrasis” of the [supposedly] real), transforming into writing “the pink tips of her ears, the dark comma of wetted hair at the nape of her neck, the pale taut skin of her shoulders stretched on their intricately assembled ailettes of moulded bone, the slippery, silken slope of her back bisected along the dotted line of vertebrae” (125). Along with the poetic features of repeated alliteration and consonance in these lines, the references to commas, ailettes (a plate for shoulder protection in medieval armour, but also for the purpose of displaying heraldic signs) and dotted lines here indicates the requisition of the material body to Freddie’s formalist sensibility and his project of writing.

These various elements of violence and aestheticism are brought together in the novel’s erotic narrative, a source of which is Pauline Reage’s *The Story of O*, an erotic story centred on woman’s masochistic sexual experiences (McMinn 1999:132). By developing this theme in *Athena*, Banville emphasises that the power relations between Freddie and the women he imagines (either in ‘real life’ or in artworks) involves a sexual dimension of power and subjection, while also suggesting that sexual desires are usually mixed up with desires of other kinds, such as the desire to know, or to be able to uncover an essential identity. However, the presence of S/M themes in *Athena* seems to complicate my reading of masochistic subjectivity, because it appears to show Freddie enjoying outright expressions of his power over a woman. Indeed,

A.'s requests to be beaten suggest (because A. stands in for language and for visual representation) that Freddie consistently desires knowledge and power and that this desire is consistent with male domination and violence against women. Freddie describes A. as "a devotee of pain: nothing was as real to her as her suffering" (175). She keeps a photograph of a Chinese criminal "being put to death by the ordeal of a thousand cuts in a public square in Peking" (ibid.); a criminal whose face shows "the ecstasy of one lost in contemplation of a transcendent reality" (176). A. enjoys the whippings she requests from Freddie – she "shut her eyes and rolled her head from side to side, slack-mouthed in ecstasy like Bernini's St Theresa" (175), and he declares the whip they use to be "magic, more wand than whip, working transfigurations of the flesh" (ibid.). A.'s photograph is an example of Banville's occasional presentation of sexualised power relations through an oriental context, as noted by Patricia Coughlan (82).<sup>36</sup> However, the central factor here is that the variety of meanings A. embodies is co-ordinated through the aesthetic. These "transfigurations of the flesh" bruise and mark A.'s body (if we believe she exists materially), but this is at the same time an almost spiritual submission to a sublime or godly power. Moreover, if A. is an externalised projection of Freddie's desires, then these transfigurations should really be attributed to him.

Freddie portrays whipping A. as cathartic, an act that integrates all aspects of identity. Initially when A. asks Freddie to "*Hit me, hit me like you hit her*" (171; original emphasis), making explicit the link to his murder of Josie Bell, Freddie is shocked and changes the subject.<sup>37</sup> When recounting their violent sexual relationship some pages later, Freddie's criminal past re-surfaces in his mind and is linked to his project of redemption through "imagining" another being. In fact, it is as though the sexualized role-play unburdens him by allowing him to use violence to "create" a new being:

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<sup>36</sup> A. is connected with oriental exoticism in at least two other places in the text (*A* 119, 165).

<sup>37</sup> He also suddenly recalls the smell of the basement and, although no detail is given, readers will surmise that he recognises the smell of paints or solvents used to create the fake paintings and thus on some level intuits the "trick" that is being played on him by The Da.

I was monster and at the same time man. She would thrash under my blows with her face screwed up and fiercely biting her own arm and I would not stop, no, I would not stop. And all the time something was falling away from me, the accretion of years, flakes of it shaking free and falling with each stylised blow that I struck . . . How wan and used and lost she looked after these bouts of passion and pain, with her matted eyelashes and her damp hair smeared on her forehead and her poor lips bruised and swollen, a pale, glistening new creature I hardly recognised, as if she had just broken open the chrysalis and were resting a moment before the ordeal of unfolding herself into this new life I had given her. I? Yes: I. Who else was there, to make her come alive? (175).

This passage describes A. through tiny physical details, but at the same time presents her as entirely an invention of Freddie's imagination. A. enables a number of other contradictions to co-exist, too: the "stylised" monster co-exists with the man, pain co-exists with passion and creativity with destruction. In other words, A. makes possible Freddie's self-sustaining paradox of masochistic subjectivity. Because A.'s desires so closely replicate Freddie's earlier "failure of imagination" and his obsession with visual mastery and the idea of a stable frame in representation, they can be understood as a reflection or indirect reiteration of Freddie's own strategy of self-presentation. What is masochistic here, however, is not essentially the act of beating but the structure of subjectivity and relationship to power that is established through the operation of desire. The request to be beaten comes from A. but is based on Freddie's earlier actions. This has the effect, typical of masochism, of circulating desire through the other, for if A. is a projection of Freddie's imagination, then her desires originate with Freddie as well. In this sense, A.'s apparently masochistic desires can be read as an elaborate method of dramatising Freddie's own equation of desire for a woman with desire for control over representation. A. threatens to collapse the illusion of a distinction between self and other that Freddie narrates. As I will show, this points to the structure of self that constitutes the real form of masochism in the novel.

Voyeurism and exhibitionism also play a significant role in the relationship of Freddie and A., and this can be seen as part of a continuous thread connected to the desire for visual mastery in the central scenes of *The Book of Evidence* and similar scenes in *Ghosts*. It is clear by now that A.'s desires are reflections of Freddie's own; he even acknowledges that she is, to him, the "moving mirror in which I surprised myself" (118). It is not a simple case of reflection, but of the two of them commingling, such that the attributions of intention and desire within their relationship become difficult to follow. For instance, when A. requests that she be blindfolded and paraded before the window naked, Freddie only pretends to do as she asks. It soon turns out she knows he pretended and requests that he really take her to the window next time. Freddie tells the reader that "[s]he desired to be seen, she said, to be a spectacle, to have her most intimate secrets purloined and betrayed. Yet I ask myself now if they really were her secrets that she offered up on the altar of our passion or just variations invented for this or that occasion" (158-59). The second sentence quoted above does not exclude the possibility that Freddie is referring to the secrets being his own: he hints both that her secrets are not really secrets and that they are not *her* secrets but his own. While A. seems to create capricious "variations" of sexual behaviour, clearly Freddie's narratives could also be described in this way. Her exhibitionism must also remind us of Freddie's own desire to be a spectacle, to be publicly betrayed or displayed, that was central in *The Book of Evidence*.

If the distinction between A. and Freddie is very difficult to discern here, the development of this exhibitionism complicates matters further. In a central scene in the novel, A. leads Freddie into a brothel where a prostitute named Rosie will watch them having sex. Freddie, however, cannot "perform," so instead they pretend to have sex, thus performing their sexual performance. He writes that A. was pleased with this, and (in this instance, at least) preferred "not the act itself, but acting" (164). At this point the emphasis is on Freddie's impotence and his sadness at the hardened indifference shown by Rosie. Such a reversal of power is also seen, some pages earlier, in the installation of a peephole in the false wall of the secret room. We



recall that it was through a “hole in the wall” that Freddie first glimpsed A., but in order to emphasise the error of Freddie’s investment in visual knowledge, Banville has him mistakenly install the fish-eye lens A. has bought (in order that he might spy on her) the wrong way around (155). It becomes clear that—as Freddie emphasises—it is A. who holds the power over him; it is she “who devised the games, she was mistress of the revels” (154). Predictably, Freddie’s apparent position of visual privilege and sexual domination seem to turn against him. This is particularly so following the embarrassing episode at the brothel, when A. delivers what Freddie calls “her version of the lash” (178). She tells how she returned to the brothel another day and had sex with Rosie and a man who “must have been a sailor or something, he said he hadn’t had it for months. He was huge. Black hair, these very black eyes, and an earring” (177). She recounts the details of the threesome, emphasising the anal sex and the whipping she received. In this case, the sexually adventurous turn of Freddie and A.’s relationship allows Freddie to narrate his lack of sexual dominance rather than the opposite.

The sailor in A.’s story fulfills the role of “the Greek” in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, a dark, powerful figure of ambiguous gender, who arrives to complete the humiliation of the masochist and take possession of the desired woman. This kind of fantasy appeared in *Ghosts*, too, when Freddie imagines his wife’s new lover (whose existence is merely speculation) and admits “there is something in me that wants it to have happened . . . flitting in panic this way and that in the torture chamber of my imaginings” (170). Arguably, the sailor also shares this role with the Da who is, it is suggested, A.’s father.<sup>38</sup> The Da is the mastermind behind the art heist who manipulates Freddie, using the copied paintings, and may be directing A. to play her role too. He is also fond of dressing up in disguises, meeting Freddie dressed as a priest and calling on Aunt Corky dressed as a woman. Freddie describes the Da’s face as a “disguise within a disguise and behind it someone else entirely had stepped up and put a different eye

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<sup>38</sup> The Da’s name may remind us of the pre-eminence in psychoanalysis of masculinist images of subjective presence and wholeness - particularly the “da” or “there” of Freud’s fort/da game and Lacan’s symbolic name-of-the-father, or transcendental signifier.

to the empty socket and looked out at me with casual and amused contempt” (185). The Da’s elaborate mysteriousness here both obscures and announces the close relationship he has to Freddie’s inexorable path toward self-deception. The Da and the sailor are figures of a powerful self-assertion that takes place within masochism: they are expressions of the masochist’s power over himself, taking forms that allow Freddie to become his own antagonist and complete his own humiliation.

Despite the fact that it is Freddie who beats A., we have seen how this serves both Freddie’s inclusion of contradictory aspects of self (“I was both man and monster”) and the humiliation A. inevitably delivers. As I have argued throughout this thesis, readings of Banville as a postmodern or poststructuralist writer are problematic if we understand his fiction to promote aesthetic values of wholeness, essence and redemption – even if they are presented in the most negative and self-deluded forms. In doing so I have sought to distinguish the model of masculine subjectivity and the power relations developed by Banville while recognising their similarity to elements of contemporary literary theory. Because *Athena* offers another opportunity to assess the relation of Banville’s fiction to such theory, I will turn again to the work of Nick Mansfield, whose discussion of textual pleasure in the late work of Roland Barthes explores the relation between the amorous subject and the loved one (the love object), and shows it to be characterised by masochistic indifference (1997:76-83). In fact, Barthes’ model of textual pleasure and desire, often identified with poststructuralist *différance*, provides one of the clearest theoretical articulations of desire as Mansfieldian “indifference” and of a subject that controls power by emphasising its own loss of power. Barthes’s description of his project, quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, discusses the male lover as a figure who speaks “within himself” to a loved one “who does not speak.” So often in Banville’s fiction the male narrator desires a girl or woman who does not speak (or if she does occasionally speak, it is “better” when she does not): Sophie in *Mefisto*, Charlotte in *The Newton Letter*, and Flora in *Ghosts* are obvious examples. For Mansfield, Barthes’s amorous subject represents an exem-

plary form of masochism, so here I will briefly examine Barthes's position—or what is, more accurately, Barthes's refusal to take a position—along with Mansfield's argument, because they illuminate very clearly the way *Athena*, and Banville's fiction in general, represents masculinity by manipulating structures of power and desire.

The long passage quoted above in which Freddie describes losing A. places us squarely in the territory of desire and textual pleasure outlined in Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. In one section of that text, entitled "Flayed," Barthes writes about "[t]he particular sensibility of the amorous subject, which renders him vulnerable, defenseless to the slightest injuries" (1990:95). Like Banville's images of flaying noted above, Barthes suggests the amorous subject is a kind of martyred, physically assailed figure. However, it is for reasons other than this imagery that Mansfield understands Barthes's lover as masochistic, as we will see. In relation to *Athena*, Barthes's amorous subject seems to provide an accurate model for Freddie's desire for A: one of Barthes's first themes of the lover is the desire to be engulfed (1990:10-12), a state like "hypnosis," which "commands me to swoon without killing myself" (11) and is thus a suspension of self. Engulfment offers a suspension in which suddenly all the lover's troubles are unweighted: "for the brief interval of a vacillation, I lose my structure as a lover: this is a factitious mourning, without work to do" (11). Just like certain accounts of the sublime, Barthes imagines the triumph of the subject in moments of self-loss that occur in the paradoxical interval between self and other: the loss of the other de-structures but also empowers the subject to an expanded sense of possibility. With regard to the discussion of mourning in the previous section of this chapter, Barthes's comment also indicates, as I have suggested, that the amorous subject feigns the work of mourning, adopting its appearances but collapsing its structure in the process of self-affirmation through perpetual loss.

Barthes also understands textual pleasure as locked into the refusal to make choices. This is particularly relevant to Banville's art trilogy because Freddie frequently denies his ability to make free choices, thereby invoking a loss of power that can apply to any situation. In

*The Book of Evidence* he suggested that his crime should be mitigated by the idea that his actions were not intentional acts of free will, and that his life was characterised by a state of “drift” (BE 37). Kim Worthington argued that in *The Book of Evidence* this posture of determinism showed Freddie’s implicitly poststructuralist view of language and identity to be morally and socially untenable. While I suggested in the first section of this chapter that we qualify this literal or referential reading by understanding Freddie’s narrative as performative, I did not claim that Banville directly affirms a poststructuralist notion of subjectivity. Although Banville presents subjectivity as indeterminacy, he does so in order to reinstate a formalist aesthetic ideal – a structure that will ground subjectivity but that operates only through the maintenance of an impossible ideal. In *Athena*, Freddie is still seeking a visual economy that will provide this structure, but he aligns it more explicitly with sexual pleasure and the pleasure of the ekphrastic text. Barthes provides another context for understanding the pleasure that arises from Freddie’s exploitation of the chink between the referential and the performative. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Barthes suggests that to get pleasure one can subvert the “plain” or boring text through excess attentiveness. By reading the scrupulous grammar or bland description one can find perversion. This can also occur when reading a story, the end of which is known, as if it were not known: “I know and I do not know, I act toward myself as if I did not know” (47). This form of the refusal to choose, which is also the refusal to maintain the logical structure of dialectical oppositions, exhibits the contradictory subjective vacillation typical of masochistic discourse. Thus, while there is a denotative level on which Freddie and A. participate in sado-masochistic play (and which, despite appearing otherwise, tends to reinforce Freddie’s identity as powerless to truly command A.), a parallel with Barthes’s description of the refusal to choose suggests Freddie’s desire relies upon a refusal to see anything but his own desires the fake paintings and, more generally, that the text of the novel enacts his refusal to ‘decide upon’ A.’s presence or absence. Freddie perhaps could work out that he is being manipulated and that his readings of the paintings are self-deluded, but he does not

wish to. He prefers to maintain the contradiction, believing simultaneously that he knows and does not know the truth of his identity and the representations he creates and studies. The pleasure of Freddie's text consists of his commitment to error and undecideability, which 'locks up' any possible resolution in order to maintain control over his representations.

Barthes links textual pleasure not with mastery, or heroic masculinity, but with becoming "intractable":

The pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one's chest. My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world) (1975:18-19; original emphasis).

Freddie's narrative in *Athena* invests in precisely this kind of pleasure, such as when he is being pressured into helping Morden and Francie, and muses upon moments when "everything seems to break free and just drift . . . in which the self hangs weightless in a sort of fevered stillness" (13-14). Freddie presents this lack of volition and clear intentionality as an aside that occurs outside narrative progression as a means of "amusing [himself] in this brief intermission before everything starts up again" (14). This connects Freddie's subjective state and "intractable" textual pleasure with the effects A. has on him – she too is figured as representing this narrative drift. For instance, occasional narrative contradictions and slips in time or place are attributed to her: "Things like that get lost in her, dates, events, the circumstances of certain meetings, decisive conversations and their outcomes" (53). A couple of pages later, A. leads Freddie to the basement and then suddenly disappears, creating another rupture in the narrative. Indeed, this rupture is connected to the overall pattern of Freddie's (almost intentional) misrecognitions as well, for just after A. leaves him Francie turns up and Freddie is left looking guilty in

the area where the fake artworks were painted (55). “Driven about by illusions, seductions and intimidations,” to use Barthes’ phrase, Freddie’s acquiescence to the requests of Francie and Morden, as well as those of A., is initiated by a small *non sequitur*, or break in the narrative. The non-heroic, non-teleological state of drift is therefore a feature of subjectivity that can be offered up in the arrangement of narrative sequence.

In *A Lover’s Discourse* Barthes proposes the ‘converse’ of his “unmasculine” drift: that feminisation is an attribute of the lover and of one who enjoys the pleasure of the text: “in any man who utters the other’s absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminised. A man is not feminised because he is inverted, but because he is in love” (1990:14; original emphasis). It is not role-reversal that counts here (though it is part of the genre of masochism), but the kind of love based around waiting and suffering that Barthes sees as an expansion of the amorous (male) subject into feminine mystery, and that Mansfield considers masochistic. Freddie too portrays himself as feminised on occasion, at one point suggesting his failure to understand women “is the prime underlying fact of [his] life” (46). The blame for this lies not with his mother or his wife, he thinks, but rather it is a “lack that was in me from the start” (ibid.). He speculates that he might be “a spoilt woman, in the way that there used to be spoilt priests” (ibid.), but rejects this too. Finally, he concludes that

it is not the anima lost in me that I am after, but the ineffable mystery of the Other (I can hear your ribald snigger); that is what all my life long I have plunged into again and again as into a choked Sargasso Sea wherein I can never find my depth. I thought in you [A.] my feet at last would reach the sandy floor . . . Now it seems I was wrong, wrong again. (46-47)

The Sargasso Sea is not, of course, an image of a rational and balanced approach to the other: it is traditionally a dangerous place for ships that entangles and restrains their passage, and

in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) it symbolises the unbridgeable schisms separating the realities of the West Indies and England, in particular through the different perspectives of men and women trying to relate across the explicitly violent cultural and historical gulf that separates them. Despite his protests of readerly bias ("I can hear your ribald snigger"), Freddie repeatedly asserts that the central binary between self and other is an "ineffable" relationship between men and women.

Nick Mansfield draws together these elements of Barthes' texts as part of his argument that "the subject that has been seen as the primary locus of subversion and transgression in poststructuralism conforms to the specific power relationship of masochism" (1997:78). He shows that while Barthes' subject of textual pleasure has often been misunderstood as embodying freedom from essentialism because of the recognition of difference within identity that indeterminate textuality offers, Barthes actually formulates this pleasure as a suspension of difference that promotes self-centredness focused on the lover's own voice, and champions the "inward gaze" of a strategically immobilised masculinity. This clarifies the central issue of Banville's art trilogy: the way in which Freddie confuses representations of women with real women. As Mansfield argues, the loved one "is not simply being objectified by the lover—he/she doesn't become a fetish. Instead he/she is being constructed as an unstable, perhaps ineffable, zone that both troubles and excites the lover" (1997:79). There are two important consequences to note here. Firstly, Mansfield complicates the notion of the male gaze as a direct objectification of the female other through an epistemological and appropriative structure. In Freudian psychoanalysis, fetishism is an over-investment in the object that provides a substitute image or veil in order to posit subjective unity and thus to avoid the threat of castration. By contrast, the loved one as "ineffable" object—as well as matching Freddie's use of the word—serves a masochistic subject that positions itself as perpetually fragmented, lacking the 'right' knowledge, and inhabiting the margins of a 'proper' life-narrative. This loved one is evoked in such a way that we cannot separate partial appropriation from partial mystifica-

tion. Secondly, the painting motif is emphasised in *Athena* and the art trilogy precisely because of what W.J.T. Mitchell called “ekphrastic indifference” – the recognition that the visual can never really be translated into texts. If the paintings Freddie studies seem to offer a unified image which could support a stable viewer-subject, it is only because of Freddie’s own efforts to project an imagined unity upon them. Freddie’s demonstration of the performative construction of subjectivity employs the destabilised relation between an (idealised) visual artwork and the text that attempts to translate it not in order to deconstruct the relation between signs and referents, but to combine and confuse two modes of representation. While it appears that the loved other is distinct from the subject because of the powerful and damaging effects of her absence, this “ineffable zone” of the other is a structural element of the subject – the sublime zone in which dialectical thought and intentionality are confounded, and in which desire re-writes the real.

Finally in this section, I want to examine the Aunt Corky thread of *Athena*, because it raises important questions that link back to the themes of confession and an ethical relation to the other in *The Book of Evidence*. *Athena* displays the classic triangular structure, first identified by Ruth Frehner, that situates the male narrator between two very different female characters; in this case, A. and Aunt Corky. Patricia Coughlan singles out some of the positive aspects of Freddie’s care for Aunt Corky as a sign that Freddie makes a “tacit but powerful moral acknowledgement of the just demands of the other” (92), and thereby returns us to some of the ethical concerns discussed earlier in this chapter. Freddie describes his aunt in terms that seem to recognise her as a real individual in a way that A. is not, and the reader may surmise that without sex or art as motivations Freddie might be able to relate to others clearly and justly. It is true that Banville does not often create relationships where the narrator cares for a family member; usually his male protagonists strike out alone to pursue their “quests” alone. It therefore seems unusually sensitive of Freddie to take Aunt Corky, however begrudgingly, to live in his flat, and to try to improve her quality of life. While I do not want to reject entirely



the possibility that Freddie shows some moral development, there remains a case to be made that, just like A., Aunt Corky functions as a reflection of Freddie's own selfish concerns – especially his commitment to presenting his every action and intention as misjudged or bound to fail.

The rest home where Aunt Corky resides resembles the white room in which A. and Freddie meet, but also the underground laboratory from *Mefisto*: “I had the impression, and still have it despite the evidence of later experience, that the room was huge, a vast, white, faintly humming space at the centre of which Aunt Corky lay” (28); in other words, she is another canvas for Freddie's “powers of misrecognition” (89). However, Freddie quickly backs away when Mrs Haddon suggests that Aunt Corky needs to be cared for at home, noting that it is “[a]mazing how the world keeps on offering new opportunities for betrayal” (96). He later rushes to ‘save’ her when she calls him in distress. Discussing Aunt Corky's ‘release’ with Mrs Haddon and Father Fanning, Freddie notes that “[a] headache started up like a series of hammer-blows and made it seem as if I were being forced to bend towards the floor in definite but imperceptible stages” (145). This, of course, echoes his bludgeoning of Josie Bell in *The Book of Evidence* as well as the myth of Athena. For all his emphasis on disorder and the loss of power to shape one's destiny in these novels, Banville's tendency is always to rope events into mythological and literary frames of (self-) reference that neutralise or recoup this loss (in aesthetic terms, at least). Aunt Corky, it seems, will contribute to Freddie's imagined relationship with A. in some way.

In terms of the “essential self” Freddie is always seeking, Aunt Corky is much like him: she has “an intimately dramatic relationship with the world at large; no phenomenon of history or happenstance was so momentous or so trivial that she would not see it as an effect directed solely at her” (29). She seems to have re-invented her identity in a similar way to Freddie. When Aunt Corky tells Freddie about her son who slipped from her grasp and was lost during the war, Freddie notes his own attentiveness and generosity as the products of “self regard”

(94). The truth of this is demonstrated some pages later, when Freddie breaks down while washing A.'s hair because her head reminds him of his son. He tells A. that his son died in very similar terms to Aunt Corky's son: "I lost him,' I said, the words coming out in jerks and weepy plops. 'He just slipped out of my hands and was gone.' . . . [I] told her of my poor boy who was born damaged and died . . . I wonder if she believed my tale, my tall tale?" (127). Another area in which Aunt Corky seems to reflect or project Freddie's own interests is her mention of art: she shares some of Freddie's implicit views of art, although they do not actually discuss art and Freddie seems uninterested when his aunt starts talking about it. She believes that "[a]rt is prayer" (33), mimicking Freddie's construction of art as his own secret and sacred space. On another occasion, we learn that "Aunt Corky had got religion" (73), which is similar to Freddie's admission of religious activity while in prison (*G* 192).

Aunt Corky's meeting with the Da "was to be her last levee" (185) Freddie tells the reader after the Da leaves. Freddie goes out and when he gets home later, Aunt Corky has fallen and broken her hip. He carries her upstairs, feeling that "[f]or those few minutes you were my life and all that I had left undone in it, not to mention one or two things that I had done but should not have. I wanted to save you, to bring you back into the world, to knit up your poor shattered bones and make you whole. While all I managed to do was to hasten your dying. I wish you had not left me your money" (193). On balance, the Aunt Corky thread shows some signs of care and consideration in Freddie, and of course I am not suggesting that these are possible within the framework of masochistic subjectivity. However, it is worth emphasising that his care for Aunt Corky is accompanied by Freddie's sense that she offered him redemption. She was an opportunity for Freddie to restore wholeness, and her death is therefore another failure because he has in fact "hastened her dying." This, and the other examples given above, should make it clear that Aunt Corky is treated with compassion and accorded the status of a "real" person, but that, at the same time, Freddie presents her in ways which reinforce his own sense of failure to care for another and are therefore intrinsically connected to his enactment of

masculine subjectivity ordered by the sublime.

If, as I have suggested, Banville's work has attracted the label of 'postmodern fiction,' then one of the reasons for this is that it creates a playful aestheticism that appears to deconstruct essentialist notions of subjectivity while in fact presenting subjectivity in a way that incorporates and neutralises all possible challenges. Through the loss of A., Freddie's narrative gains its *raison d'être* and the source of its value and pleasure: namely, the perpetuation of his aesthetic project in its avowed condition of impossibility. Freddie's marionette-like role-play of the self and other tends to confuse this very distinction, even when it seems the power structure could not be clearer – as in the violent sexual acts in *Athena*. By remaining attached to an ideal essence while everywhere its fictionality is emphasised, what gets "entombed" in the text is in fact not a structuring movement of difference but an ideal of subjective unity disguised as perpetual absence, loss or misrecognition. The sexualisation of issues surrounding representation is one of the most fascinating aspects of *Athena*, although in fact it only makes explicitly sexual what is an important nexus of issues surrounding representation, gender and power with which Banville is concerned in all his novels.

## Chapter 6

# ***“Only shaping”*: Revenant Bodies and Redeemed Masculinities in *Eclipse* and *Shroud***

*. . . the poem seems to be shaped by the undoing of shapes*<sup>1</sup>

*There is not a sincere bone in the entire body of my text*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Shroud*, 329.

## 6.1 Afterlife

At the beginning of his confessional memoir, *The Future Lasts Forever* (1993), Louis Althusser describes his involvement in his wife's death, or as much of it as he could recall between the "zones of darkness" into which he had descended. He describes how, when his panic had lessened and he recognised clearly that Hélène was dead, he placed a ribbon of curtain diagonally across her chest "from her right shoulder to her left breast" (16) in imitation of Jacques Martin's suicide (Martin had laid a rose upon his own chest) which had seemed to Althusser to send a "silent message from beyond the grave" (16). Although Althusser's memoir is associated with *Shroud* (2002), since it is in that novel that Banville acknowledges *The Future Lasts Forever* as a source, we might also consider the connection with the following passage from *Eclipse* (2000):

As they went reeling past us, one of them, a blue-eyed brute clutching himself by the wrist, turned about suddenly and with a flick of his hand, the palm of which bore a broad gash from knife or broken bottle, threw a long splash of blood diagonally across Cass's dress . . . Cass said nothing, only stood a moment with her arms lifted away from her sides, looking down at the crimson sash of blood athwart her white bodice. At once, without a word, we turned back to the house, and she went off quickly upstairs and changed her dress, and we set out again, to wherever it was we had been going, as if nothing had happened. I do not know what she did with the white dress. It disappeared. When her mother questioned her about it she refused to answer. I said nothing, either. I think now that what had happened had happened out of time, I mean had happened somehow not as a real event at all, with causes and consequences, but in some special way, in some special dimension of dream or memory. (192-3)

In what sense does the diagonal mark link Banville's text to Althusser's? Is it a symbolic connection, or is this over-reaching the boundaries of plausible interpretation? Is the "blue-eyed

brute” a stand-in for Alex or Axel (since both are described as blond and blue-eyed),<sup>3</sup> and is the diagonal mark therefore a reference to an aesthetic appeasement of male violence? To begin with, we can perhaps say that Althusser’s memoir resonates with the “special dimension of dream or memory” Alex describes and with the role of the sign as a portent in *Eclipse* and *Shroud*. Banville’s protagonists are always searching for a unique sign that will announce the arrival of some special knowledge or state of being. Their writing holds up this ideal in the knowledge that it is inevitably constituted by signifiers that mark an empirical or referential absence. What is of particular interest is the role of Cass Cleave, who is an intermediary between the male protagonists, and a key figure within the novels’ articulation of masculine subjectivities. Although her real name is Catherine, Cass is clearly associated with the mythological Cassandra and is explicitly linked to prophecy and paranoia from her father’s narrative point of view: “Everything that happens, she is convinced, carries a specific and personal reference to her. There is nothing, not a turn in the weather, or a chance word spoken in the street, that does not covertly pass on to her some profound message of warning or encouragement” (*E* 71). The plot of *Eclipse* hinges on Alexander’s prescient awareness of Cass’s pregnancy and suicide, and the link between their names—Cassandra is also known as Alexandra in Greek mythology—implies a heightened sense of interconnection between the two. Names also offer some justification for fairly lax policing of the boundary between *Eclipse* and *Shroud*: Alex and Axel form a neat Banvillean symmetry, and our reading of the novels is broadened considerably by dealing with both at once. We might consider many of Alexander’s memories, dreams and hallucinations of Cass to be “messages from the grave” of the same sort as Althusser’s tragic symbolism quoted above, since they are often invested with the same uncanny significance. In *Shroud*, Cass’s mental instability is inevitably associated with Axel Vander’s Nietzschean decla-

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<sup>3</sup> Alex for instance: “Think of your ideal Hamlet and you have me: the blond straight hair – somewhat grizzled now – the transparent, pale-blue eyes, the Nordic cheekbones, and that thrust out jaw, sensitive, and yet hinting at depths of refined brutality” (*E* 8). Axel is of similar appearance, and also describes himself as tall and powerful before being maimed.

mations on the absence of truth, morality and an essential self. With this in mind, Banville's echo of Althusser's paranoid symbolism suggests that the coherence and stability of the self is profoundly implicated in the interpretation of signs and in the problematic nature of the connection between language—especially privileged poetic tropes such as the symbol—and the empirical world as it is experienced 'outside' of language. Furthermore, these issues are articulated through the mind-body distinction, and with special reference to female 'madness.'

The implications of such symbolic gestures are further highlighted by a more direct point of comparison between Althusser's memoir and Banville's fiction. *Shroud's* Axel Vander, of course, appears to be partly modeled on Althusser: Vander is an intellectual who kills his wife, though clearly not accidentally as seems to be the case with Althusser, and the character of Magda echoes that of Hélène, Althusser's wife, in some ways. The guilt that Banville borrows from Althusser's memoir is both that of wrongdoing against a wife, and that which generates the pleasure of performative language. This is evident in Banville's use of Althusser's story about finding a sense of belonging among a group of farmers threshing grain, which he acknowledges in an afternote to *Shroud*.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Althusser describes being "in the company of real men breathing in the smell of sweat, meat, wine, and sexuality" (1993:81). The other men were even "vying with each other to offer me a glass of wine to the accompaniment of ribald jokes . . . I drank a little and was applauded" (ibid.). Immediately, Althusser makes the "painful confession" that none of these events occurred, and that he had merely heard the men at their meal from outside the room (ibid.). By having Vander present this false memory as well, Banville highlights his tendency to fictionalise his own character and history, or to consider the past in terms of counter-memory, as an unrepresentable relation of desire rather than a set of determinate facts. This is corroborated by the plots of both *Eclipse* and *Shroud*, since in both novels an 'unconscious' memory is revealed to have shaped their narrative. The implication is perhaps best expressed by Althusser's famous claim that "as there is no such

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<sup>4</sup> The paraphrase of Althusser's story appears on 71-74 of *Shroud*. Banville's acknowledgment is on 407.

thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of” (qtd. in Wolfreys 3).

Of course, Vander is guilty of having falsified his past without Althusser’s help, for he is literally an imposter: he has taken on the name and identity of the (presumably) dead Axel Vander. Althusser’s influence on Banville is significant because it consists of a sense of subjective ‘instability,’ or ‘performativity,’ that varies from the paranoid attachment to symbols, as seen with the splash of blood across Cass’s dress, to a sense of self-erasure and exclusion from male society.<sup>5</sup> The pastoral fiction Banville borrows from Althusser—“All this [Axel] remembered, even though it had never happened” (S 74)—superficially questions an ‘authentic,’ autonomous subjectivity inscribed in an autobiographical text, but does so in order to re-figure masculine subjectivity as a performative identity.

While *Eclipse* and *Shroud* seem to question the positive values of the symbol (communal or universal agreement, spiritual or contemplative transcendence of the material, an essence of subjectivity) that are central to the protagonists’ motivation as well as intrinsic to the narrative structure of the texts, I will argue that Banville’s negation of referentiality—announced directly in the epigraph to *Shroud* taken from Nietzsche<sup>6</sup>—and of symbolic essences works to reinforce the very ideals it appears to disavow. The novels deny, and thereby reinstate, the desire for an act of signification that as yet has no form, no concept or image, but that indicates some meaning or content beyond the subject’s current perception. In the aesthetic of the sublime this incapacity can be understood as a paradoxical transformation of negation into an intuition of renewed power.

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<sup>5</sup> Althusser’s relationship to his namesake, his dead uncle Louis whom his mother loved and wanted to marry, is another painful example of what he saw as his exclusion or disqualification from authentic experience. He hears this echo in language itself in the form of “the third person pronoun (*lui*), which deprived me of any personality of my own, summoning as it did an anonymous other. It referred to my uncle, the man who stood behind me: *‘Lui’ was Louis*. It was him my mother loved, not me” (Althusser 1993:39; original emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> “We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further, e.g., the word ‘I,’ the word ‘do,’ the word ‘suffer’: - these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not ‘truths’” (epigraph to *Shroud*).



Elke D'hoker has described this apparent tension in Banville's fiction in terms of the conflicting impulses of romantic idealism and philosophical skepticism, and suggests that the "knowledge" on offer through such idealism is not enough to offset the skepticism evident elsewhere (2004b:74-6).<sup>7</sup> In *Eclipse* and *Shroud*, the central symbols are missed, or missing, and therefore make a deeply ironic statement: Alexander Cleave and Lily are in the circus tent during the eclipse while Vander and Cass cannot seem to gain entry to see the shroud, and eventually give up. Nevertheless, at other times Banville accords signs like the splash of blood across Cass's dress (properly an "index" in C.S. Peirce's terminology) a special significance – in this case the status of an event that "happened out of time" or outside of empirical reality. Other signs, like Mama Vander's pawned pill box, can seemingly be "redeemed," bought back even by one who was never their legitimate heir in the first place. On the stage, through works of art, or in epiphanies of the commonplace, signs may regain their aesthetic power and thereby reaffirm the subject who textualises them. Thus the process of negation and redemption is central to both the symbolism and narrative structure of Banville's fiction – a point suggested with a different emphasis by Imhof's description of "redemptive despair." However, rather than treating the opposing poles of this ambivalence as a contest of opposites or a dialectic that might be resolved, I suggest that it can be understood in terms of the economy of desire described earlier as a "masochistic sublime." On this reading, skeptical moves facilitate a structure of desire that is organised around an ideal subjectivity integrated with its objects through a "special" sign or code.

The role of negation and self-estrangement in the parallels with Althusser leads to the main issues that I will consider in this chapter. My argument primarily addresses the issue of the performance of an 'authentic' representation of the masculine self, and the role of representations of gender in this performance. Masculinity is staged (at least in part) through

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<sup>7</sup> To be fair, D'hoker deals primarily with *Doctor Copernicus* in this essay. However, she ignores the issue of the signature "D.C." which, as I discuss in Chapter Two, casts a problematic retrospective claim of authorship over the text, and reinforces the humanistic values implied by the harmonious resolution with which the novel ends.

triangular relationships (consisting of the male narrator and two female characters, one of whom is absent) which create a dramatic framework in which the apprehension of a fundamental materialism or objectivity beyond consciousness and self-expression is the marker of authenticity.<sup>8</sup> The figural or rhetorical energy (often made explicit as sexual desire) within the narrative voice undercuts the possibility of such an anti-humanist mode of perception. The contested status of the subject of this perception is considered as a key aspect of this performance. A full exploration of these issues requires that we turn to the other critical theorist upon whom the protagonist of *Shroud* is modeled, whose work on aesthetic ideology strangely mirrors the “afterlife” of the aesthetic as it appears in Banville’s fiction: Paul de Man.

Appropriately, Jonathan Loesberg has observed that “considering the regularity with which he is declared dead, [Paul de Man] threatens to become our most undead theorist” (87). De Man, like Althusser, is a model for the character of Axel Vander in *Shroud*, and by revisiting the scandal of de Man’s wartime journalism in a fictional form Banville makes a contribution to this “afterlife.” If deconstruction is considered dead by some, this can only suit Banville’s focus on metaphysical disappointment and theoretical detumescence. Neither is such a hint of the revenant entirely out of place in connection with de Man’s theoretical perspective on the aesthetic ideology associated with romantic idealism that Banville’s novels explore. Christopher Norris outlines how de Man’s work on aesthetic ideology targets the Romantic and post-Romantic ideology of the creative imagination that claims to achieve a harmonious reconciliation between mind and world, or objective and subjective realms. This ideology is, with varying degrees of critical reflection, an integral part of the landscape of Banville criticism. De Man showed how this “deep-laid aesthetic ideology which equates the nature of language and meaning with the nature of empirical experience” (37) became an influential element of a diverse range of literary theories, from Coleridge and Wordsworth to T.S.

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<sup>8</sup> The dualistic or triangular structure of gender relationships has been analysed by Ruth Frehner (2000), and Patricia Coughlan (2006).

Eliot, to Russian Formalism, the American New Criticism and Hans-Robert Jauss's reception theory (28-38). Norris also notes the centrality of Hegel's aesthetics in de Man's account of this ideology. The quintessentially Romantic ideal of a lost unity of "mind and nature, subject and object which was once a matter of spontaneous "natural" grasp" (31) is, in Hegel's discourse, recoverable through *Erinnerung*, what Norris calls "the power of active, living memory" (32). In the romantic ideology, subjectivity finds its apogee in the ordering principle of memory, in the recovery and assimilation of events or objects past: "the commanding metaphor that organizes this entire system is that of interiorization, the understanding of aesthetic beauty as the external manifestation of an ideal content which is itself an interiorized experience, the recollected emotion of a bygone perception" (de Man, qtd. in Norris 32). Banville's brand of counter-memorial discourse engages this process of romantic interiorisation by (ostensibly) denying the singular knowability of the past and questioning the accuracy and ethics of the aesthetic interiorisation of experience. However, his negation of a harmonious and beautiful mode of recollection implies its continued existence in its negative, or always "bygone," form, and therefore may hold out the recovery of its positive "ideal content" as a perpetual 'inspiration.'

In a postmodern culture this romantic aesthetic cannot be offered on any but ironic or problematic terms and Banville's fiction can be seen to supply many examples of this. However, *Eclipse* and *Shroud* enact a kind of afterlife of this aesthetic, in which a re-assertion of certain well-worn humanist and romantic values (the power of imagination, the remembrance of the past in the present, correlation between the self and nature), or the simulation of those values, is privileged in a narrative structure that superficially negates them. In other words, such values are presented in a highly specific negative aesthetic form. The texts also incorporate an awareness of the charges often brought against the aesthetic by political or ideological critical perspectives and resist the demystifying impulse of contemporary cultural analysis. Examples of this occur when Axel Vander, having addressed an academic audience, makes a weak joke in

order to dodge a question about his views on the current state of cultural criticism, or when Lydia teases an indignant Alexander with a Freudian interpretation of one of his dreams. Such moments in the texts build upon the image of these male narrators as embattled nostalgic formalists, wary of their recently uncovered naïveté in relation to programmatic interpretation in which the position of the disinterested critic is implicated and critiqued.

Although the defense of aesthetic formalism against more politically aware criticism need not be an ‘either-or’ choice, as some essays collected by George Levine have argued (Levine 1994), in Banville’s case this binarism is intensified – one might describe it as fetishised. The ethical or political demand (which is the focus of ideology criticism and ethical criticism) is used to further impress upon the reader the protagonists’ misreading of a situation or failure to respect or understand the other, and to dramatise and maintain this impasse, rather than to transform the terms in which the subject is understood. D’hoker’s suggestion that Banville’s epiphanies “tend to reverse the hierarchy between subject and object rather than achieve a better balance between both [and that the] subject becomes overwhelmed by the alterity of the object world and can no longer deal with it in representation” (2004a:71) reinforces this; the impossibility of representing an overwhelming alterity is put to use as part of what I have described earlier as a masochistic aesthetic of suspension and indifference.

Because the seemingly ironic stance on aesthetic experience and the cohesive agent or subject of such experience is a subtle re-assertion of an “essential” or “authentic” subject, the notion of ideology in de Man is particularly relevant here. The term, often problematic as a notion of generalised false consciousness,<sup>9</sup> is appropriate because the traditions of the

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<sup>9</sup> David Couzens Hoy outlines some common poststructuralist objections to a blanket notion of ideology (qtd. in Gatens x). While generally I acknowledge the greater flexibility of the more diverse approaches he points to, the connotations of ideology are appropriate in relation to Banville’s fiction because of the way political perspectives are anticipated and become subject matter in his texts. Banville’s use of poststructuralist or postmodern perspectives is rather superficial in the sense that the skeptical/relativist or anti-essentialist ideas his novels present are belied by an aesthetic and narrative/structural recuperation of essentialist values that is especially evident through a gender critique. In fact, the purported “loss” of structure, and of clear boundaries between self and other, propagates masochistic relationships of power.

aesthetic which Banville draws upon derive from modernity's claim to universal values. The (negative) appeal to an impossible, never realised subjectivity in Banville's novels is part of this tradition, albeit in a contemporary form. Geoffrey Harpham has noted how the aesthetic and ideology share a number of homologies, not least of which is that both form negative relations to the truth or reality they posit.<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic traditionally claims to construct a space free from ideology, in which the subject encounters its 'destiny' in rationality, but this freedom is also a key ingredient from a perspective 'inside' of an ideology. As de Man and Harpham suggest, the aesthetic is both logically and ideologically fraught. It produces, or is permeated by, power relations and must itself be considered in some sense ideological in the final analysis. In relation to Banville's fictions, the most important of these power relations is the denial or demurral of power associated with masochism and the sublime, which pursues an undeniably aestheticised vision of romantic "wholeness," is sustained through constant threat of fragmentation or indeterminacy, and which has been shown to be thoroughly compatible with the structure of ideology.<sup>11</sup>

In *Eclipse*, a negative formulation of the romantic ideology is emphasised. For instance, Alex sums up one of his memories by declaiming "Nothing happened, no grand vision was granted me, no blinding insight or sudden understanding, yet it is all there, clear as yesterday – clearer! – as if it were something momentous, a key, a map, a code, the answer to a question I do not know how to ask" (144). The negation he begins with simply emphasises the possibility of reinterpreting his memories in some as yet unknown way that promises the arrival of just

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<sup>10</sup> Harpham's conclusion is that "ideology and the aesthetic constitute each other's negation, each other's misreading; both are real imaginative constructions that (somehow) effect a passage from subject to the object, the sensory to the conceptual, the phenomenal to the moral or political. If the aesthetic is always already ideological, so, too, is ideology always already aesthetic" (qtd. in Levine 138).

<sup>11</sup> On postmodern representations of a fractured white masculinity as a response to and attempted subversion of the identity politics brought into the mainstream by feminist, civil rights, gay and lesbian rights movements, see Nick Mansfield, "Masculinity: saving the post-Oedipal world," *Subjectivity: theories of the self from Freud to Haraway*, (New York: New York UP, 2000); Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: studies in postmodern domination and difference*, (London, New York: Verso, 1995); David Savran, *Taking it Like a Man*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998).

such a “grand vision.” The statement is negative, but posits its unity and purposiveness despite its negativity; it is open to the operation of the sublime, since the momentous knowledge it posits is unrepresentable yet indicative of a “supersensible”—even if impossible—order. It is comparable to the paranoid symbolism associated with Cass even though it is described as potentially instrumental knowledge rather than a despairing symbol of mortality or accident.

The value of these aesthetic moments is implicitly questioned in *Eclipse* and *Shroud* through a self-conscious examination of male ‘artist-figures’ who have been affiliated with literary or ‘high cultural’ values. The aesthetic recuperation that I argue occurs in the resolution of such narrative conflict involves a continuation of the masculinist gender politics described in this thesis as a crisis of the masculine subject that asserts its values from within the drama of confession and self-interrogation. The novels enact the loss and ‘return’ of a female figure in order to dramatise the desire of the masculine subject to maintain an aesthetic space in which the romantic ideology of unity between world and word can subsist. De Man’s notion of a materialist perception at the heart of the sublime offers a context for understanding why the loss and return of the (imaginary) body—and particularly the female body—is so crucial here.

De Man’s importance in relation to the gender politics of symbolic or aesthetic ‘events’ such as the blood-stained dress discussed at the beginning of this chapter is complex. The most relevant point to my purposes here comes from his arguments about what he calls “Kant’s materialism,” and about the idea of a purely formal body, a topic already mentioned in Chapter Four in relation to the marionette motif in *Mefisto*. In “Kant’s Materialism” (1996), de Man reprimands the literary critical tradition for “overestimating the apparent frivolity of the aesthetic, and, hence, its vulnerability to moral censure, and underestimating its powers of cognition and deep complicity with the phenomenalist epistemology of realism” (120). He seeks to redress the tendency to view Kant’s aesthetic as a kind of imaginary pleasure-dome, rather than as a robust form of mediation between the reasoning mind and empirical experience, even if he

cannot fully subscribe to the dualistic universe Kant created. Thus, Kant's architectonic vision of the starry sky or the vast ocean when he describes the sublime "may appear to be about nature in its most all-encompassing magnitude but, in fact, it does not see nature as nature at all, but as a construction" (126). De Man argues that despite a superficial resemblance to the visions of nature found in the Romantic poets, in which the external scene corresponds to a subjective emotional state in a way that is seen as designed or purposive, Kant's theory of the sublime must involve a 'naïve' construct. The difference, summarised by Johnathan Loesberg, is between a sense of form as instrumental or purposive, and one that regards form without considering its cause:

Instead of seeing nature as having the instrumental ends of fostering life, when we look at it as poets do, we see an intrinsic form . . . Seeing nature in aesthetically formal terms, we see it as formed in correspondance with human need, even while we do not see it as externally designed to meet that need. Form thus becomes intrinsically humanised.  
(92-3)

This "counteraesthetic" perspective, as Loesberg terms it, resembles that of Wallace Stevens' snowman, who, "nothing himself, beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens 10). For de Man, it is a critical response to the Schillerian tradition that would both interiorise and instrumentalise aesthetic experience, effectively equating the aesthetic subject with humanist aims, particularly the suspect ones of Schiller's aesthetic state. Yet as Loesberg suggests, Kant does describe a "human need" at the heart of this formalist vision, and can in no way be construed as bypassing all meaning and values. Rather, it seems to posit an equally constructed "degree zero" of formalist perception that is "conceptually prior to those empirically structuring tropes" (94) that arrive as soon as we think teleologically.

*Eclipse* goes some way toward developing a perspective analogous to this materialist perception, a "counter-aesthetic" construct that seeks a perspective outside of human values.

A key example is when Alex recalls his voyeuristic fascination with a girl whose bedroom window was just visible from the bathroom of his flat, who he would often watch getting dressed in the mornings: “Nothing was wasted, not the lift of a hand, the turn of a shoulder; nothing was for show. Without knowing, in perfect self-absorption, she achieved at the start of each day there in her mean room an apotheosis of grace and suavity” (101). Alex stresses that his voyeurism is not motivated by sexual desire or power, but is an attempt to perceive the absence of self-consciousness. Here Banville again alludes to Kleist’s parable of formal perfection achieved through the absence of self-consciousness from “On the Theatre of the Marionettes” (as did *Mefisto* to a far greater degree, as discussed in Chapter Four). De Man’s discussion of this text in “Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist’s *Über das Marionettentheater*” (1984), stresses the tension between a formalisation of the body of the ‘pure’ or ‘naïve’ kind discussed in “Kant’s materialism” and the tropological or persuasive aspect of the narrative in which it is posited. Already one detects that there is a significant gender dimension to the aesthetic ideology that emerges in these articulations of a purely formal or material perception.

In order to describe the material being behind ‘self-expression,’ Banville focuses on the face and the motif of the actor’s mask:

Her face was an utter blank, an almost featureless mask . . . It is this forgetfulness, this loss of creaturely attendance, that I find fascinating. In watching someone who is unaware of being watched one glimpses a state of being that is beyond, or behind, what we think of as the human; it is to behold, however ungraspably, the unmasked self itself (E 102)

Alex echoes the Kantian phrase “thing in itself” in describing this sense of being. It seems that this state “beyond” the human might be a purely material state in which the body becomes visible because it is unencumbered by the “mask” of selfhood. This “double trope” (Loesberg) which sees formalised bodies by resisting teleological humanist understandings with its naïve



“poetic” view naturally claims disinterestedness in its observations; Alex writes that “ugliness and beauty are not categories that apply here – my questing gaze makes no aesthetic measurements. I am a specialist, with a specialist’s dispassion, like a surgeon, say, to whose diagnostic eye a girl’s budding breasts or an old man’s sagging paps are objects of equal interest, equal indifference” (102). Just as Kleist’s parables involved amputation and prosthetic formalisation, in Banville the mask of consciousness can only be removed by a disinterested, surgical eye. De Man points out that the aesthetic education Kleist orchestrates “succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible” (1984:289), and questions the pedagogical aims of Kleist’s parables. Likewise, the confessional nature of Banville’s narratives and the essentialist identity they seek to re-establish (even as they decry the possibility of such an identity) are at odds with the pure formalism of the anti-humanist perspective.

This issue appears again in *Shroud*, in another instance of the mask motif, when Axel asks, “If, as I believe, as I insist, there is no essential, singular self, what is it exactly I am supposed to have escaped by pretending to be Axel Vander?” (286). He suggests that his motivation has been to find a sense of unity: “To be someone else is to be one thing, and one thing only” (ibid.) He then develops an allegory about an actor, a “veteran of the Attic drama” (ibid.), who finds great comfort in wearing his clay mask and eventually wears it every day. When one morning he sits down at the table wearing the mask, and his family accepts it, Axel writes “[h]e has achieved his apotheosis. Man and mask are one” (287). The implication is that to be oneself is to be multiple, or to have little certainty of a stable and self-obvious identity, to be made up of an “insupportable medley of affects, desires, fears, tics, twitches” (286). If an “authentic” self can exist, it is of the order of the performative rather than the cognitive. Therefore, Axel’s seemingly contradictory position—that there is no “singular self,” but that by impersonating another such a self can be invented—is a practical elaboration of the anti-humanist perspective sought by Alex Cleave. The loosely de Manian career of “Axel Vander”,

which includes the authorship of an essay entitled “Shelley Defaced” (290),<sup>12</sup> is therefore a performance of a critical perspective that explores an anti-humanist (Nietzschean) perspective. Ultimately, however, Axel turns away from this perspective and *Shroud* reinstates the desire for an essential or “authentic” notion of human agency.

A further, more sinister instance of the mask motif that highlights the differential role gender plays in these novels occurs in one of the sections of *Shroud* that is narrated in the third person but focuses on Cass. Haunted by her “voices,” Cass falls asleep and has a dream on the train, which she then records in her notebook: “*H. the headman, his mask and bat. Maistre on the executioner: ‘who is this inexplicable being...?’ Rip the mask from his face to find – another mask. Father father father.*” (83-84; original emphasis). Here the mask is cruel and inhuman, and is linked to de Maistre’s critique of the Enlightenment notion of inherent human good and his defense of patriarchal violence and the necessity of punishment as a defense against the

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<sup>12</sup> See de Man’s “Shelley Disfigured” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. The key figure in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*, the “ghost” of Rousseau, is in fact “disfigured, *défiguré*, de-faced” (100), appearing in the form of a tree-stump or root with grass for hair and empty holes for eyes. Rousseau’s role in the poem “as one between desire and shame/Suspended” (Shelley, qtd. in de Man 1984:99), is, for de Man, one that “dramatizes the failure to satisfy a desire for self-knowledge” (99). This suggests a close analogy to Banville’s protagonists who similarly struggle, like the great dead historical figures trailing the Chariot of Life, “to know themselves; their might/Could not repress the mystery within” (Shelley 1965, 174:212-3). Effacement, in de Man’s essay, is the erasure of self-knowledge, a process that occurs through the very questions about identity that are asked and that lead to “tangles of meaning and of figuration” (1984:99). The disfigured Rousseau embodies the “highly erotic experience” (106) of forgetting (or of erasure) through which the radical “imposition”, the “positional act” (117) of the bare event that is language’s true currency (the “materialism” of the sublime), is itself written over by humanist narratives of sequence and origin. De Man’s extremely complex reading elaborates on the figures of light and specularity—a play between presence and absence, memory and forgetting, and clarity and obscurity—through which the poem fails to reconstruct a de-faced identity and likewise fails to establish an identity between language and meaning, thereby exposing the failure of the romantic ideology that guides these humanist narratives. He concludes that this (partial) erasure—this disfiguration endlessly repeated in the operation of language—can and should be “reintegrated in a historical and aesthetic system of recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy” (122). This would avoid the “monumentalization” (121-23) of historicism in a way that is congruent with the counter-memorial approach to Banville’s writing I draw upon in this thesis. By referencing “Shelley Disfigured”, Banville also alludes directly to the reflexive exploration of figuration through a character (speaker, speaking shape) in whom the phenomenal and erotic are not separated from the formal, but are joined, as is the case in de Man’s account of Shelley’s Rousseau. However, Banville employs disfiguration and the failure of the romantic ideology to sustain a negative relation to an absolute (aesthetic, historical, epistemological). This maintains a masochistic structure of desire through the simultaneous projection and fragmentation of an image of subjective wholeness or agency.

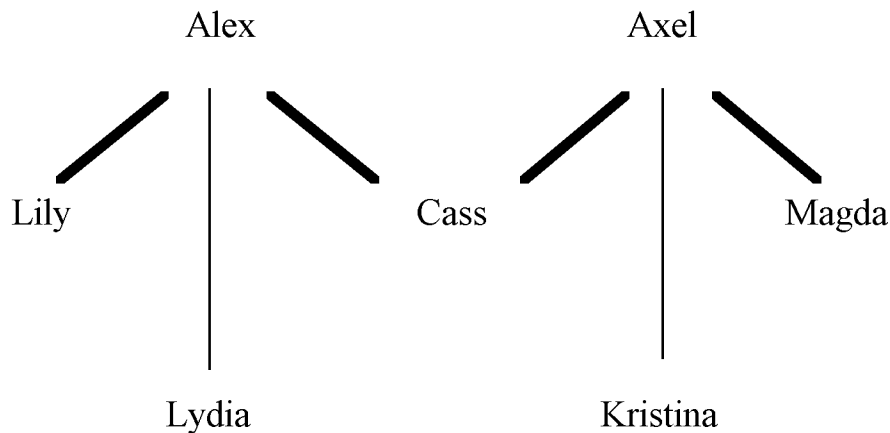
evil inherent within people.<sup>13</sup> Although Cass is a more substantial character than many of the women in Banville's fiction, her role here is as a foil or intermediary between Alex and Axel. This fragment of free indirect discourse differentiates Cass's consciousness from the stable (though endlessly elastic and ostensibly crisis-ridden) state of the male narrative voice. The tenuous metonymic linkages between the notebook fragments suggest that Cass is just as concerned with discovering her father's "authentic" identity as he is, but the structure of her discourse indicates that her identity is in danger of real disintegration – something that is never the case for Banville's male characters.

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph de Maistre's discussion of the executioner continues thus: "Who is then this inexplicable being who has preferred to all the pleasant, lucrative, honest, and even honorable jobs that present themselves in hundreds to human power and dexterity that of torturing and putting to death his fellow creatures? . . . And yet all grandeur, all power, all subordination rests on the executioner: he is the horror and the bond of human association. Remove this incomprehensible agent from the world, and at that very moment order gives way to chaos, thrones topple, and society disappears" (de Maistre 191-2). Cf. Alex's dream of being a torturer (*E* 109-110).

## 6.2 Revenant

These efforts to escape the self reflect a pattern in Banville's presentation of masculine subjectivity that relies upon particular representations of gender for its structure and coordination. This structure, set out below, enables comparisons or "superimpositions" that dramatise the male narrator's uncertain position with regards to understanding his identity, family and career:



Alex narrates memories of Cass (whose absence changes from temporary to permanent during the novel, with her death far away in Turin) while in the presence of Lily, just as Axel recalls Magda while in the presence of Cass. The present girl or woman triggers memories and speculations about the absent one. Each protagonist is also related to another woman who is his contemporary or partner. Although married, Axel and Magda are not 'partners' in the way Alex and Lydia are, because Magda is dead in the narrative present and appears only through Axel's memories. Instead, one-time lovers Axel and Kristina form this pairing. These triangular structures situate the male narrator in relation to a death in which his own identity is implicated and which he can never forget. Apart from creating symmetry between the two

novels, the function of these triangles is to support the central oppositions through which the 'masculine sublime' is able to operate.

Patricia Coughlan's essay on the erotic triangular relationships in Banville's fiction lays the groundwork for understanding these relationships. The structure she describes is compatible with the triangles set out above, as is the diversity of interpretative avenues opened up by reading desire alongside the epistemological and ethical questions so frequently associated with Banville's fiction. As Coughlan suggests, "Once the presence of the erotic is explicitly acknowledged, it is difficult to contain it within a limited sphere or at one interpretative level, so pervasive is it within the human" (82). Here I focus on the structures of desire inherent in the counter-memorial perspective on the past and in the gendered presentation of matter or the body. Coughlan rightly questions Banville's description of his writing as "post-humanist", and asserts that the performances of his narrators as "splinters, avatars, prefigurings, or alter egos . . . as stock figures from puppet, circus, and *commedia dell' arte*" (83) cannot escape a moral or ethical position nor can they avoid political critique. The very thinness of his narrators is belied by their constant preoccupation with questions about the authenticity or knowability of the self. As Coughlan is aware, this constant barrage of self-concern is not a deconstruction, but a "stubborn rearguard action of the humanist self, which is never quite overcome by post-modernity" (95). I draw on her readings of *Eclipse* and *Shroud* in my account of character relationships that follows.

These triangular structures produce a layering effect in which the ontological status of the narrator's experiences is questioned, dramatised and interwoven with the representation of gender and the sexual-epistemological schema that informs Banville's writing. First, it enables the counter-memorial treatment of people and events from the past by superimposing them on the present, enabling an obsessive collocation of the empirical and the imaginary, of figures or images that denote spatial and temporal states of being. This operates less as a critical contrast than as an aesthetics of suspension in which people or events from the past

float up to tantalise the narrator. Second, physical or material presence is contrasted with ghostly images that have form but no material reality. The mask imagery already discussed, in which the absence of consciousness highlights the ideal of a pure state of ‘objecthood’ or otherness, is merely one thread of this triangular structure, which accommodates these key representational dimensions—presence and absence, physical and non-physical—in all their contradictory forms.

This repeated, deliberate return of the absent, dead or mad female serves the presentation of the male protagonist’s desire as endlessly complex and ineluctably tied to the loss of control of his identity. Alex says of his return to the house in *Eclipse* that “it offers me a way of being alive without living” (134), and in a way this is also true of Alex and Axel’s relationships with the female characters in both of these novels<sup>14</sup>. This triangular character structure is, therefore, a “revenant” structure;<sup>15</sup> like the “return home” at the heart of nostalgia, it turns upon an impossible restoration of an idealised state of being. Just as the formalisation of the body in de Man’s counter-aesthetic animates lifeless marionettes to embody an ideal of unconscious grace, Banville’s revenant structure combines the living and the dead in order to establish a basis for his presentation of the masculine subject through the intensification of the impasse created by these impossible ‘amalgamations’ of mutually exclusive states. This vision of the masculine subject entertains the return of its always already lost other and dwells incessantly on its own loss of mastery as a means of perpetuating this state of desire.

In her discussion of Descartes’ famous attempt to doubt the reality of his body in *Meditations*, Judith Butler notes the “return” of the body through Descartes’ use of figurative language (2001:266). Butler also links Descartes’ attempt to be skeptical about the existence of

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<sup>14</sup> Lydia’s reply, “You’ve always been in love with death” (134), is also telling; but it is a very specific notion of death that Alex loves.

<sup>15</sup> One of the books Alex finds partly burned in the fireplace is Phoebe Reeves’ *The Revenant*. (1998). He also finds Collette’s *My Mother’s House*, W.D. Snodgrass’s Pulitzer Prize winning book of poems *Heart’s Needle*, and Wallace Stevens’s *The Necessary Angel*.

his body with de Man's difficulty in even describing what he calls "Kant's materialism" without recourse to figurative language, especially figures of the body (270). De Man's method of describing anti-humanist "materialism" by "seeking to trace the relapse of a trope into the materiality of the letter" (ibid.) and by mapping such "disarticulation" of language in texts that inevitably draw analogies with the dismemberment of the body cannot proceed itself without recourse to metaphors of the body. This is most evident in de Man's essays on Kant and Kleist, though it is also found in "Excuses", in the argument that the body is a metaphor for the text as already discussed in Chapter Five.

Butler concludes her essay with the proposition that "if there is a materiality of the body that escapes from the figures it conditions and by which it is corroded and haunted, then this body is neither a surface or a substance, but the linguistic occasion of the body's separation from itself, one that eludes its capture by the figure it compels" (2001:271-2). The "materiality" of the body that is posited as outside of linguistic figuration is not a substance but an event in language that is only signified at the same time as disowning or escaping that signification. Banville's fiction, I suggest, reverses and fetishises this return. The revenant structure in these novels, with their rigid construction according to figurations of gender difference, foregrounds the uncanny return of what might be considered the repressed or disavowed divisions within an idealised masculine subject. Banville highlights self-fragmentation through this structure whereby violence of one sort or another is done to the female other which the narrator must try to understand or atone for. The cultivation of this regrettable and apparently unredeemable scenario may appear to acknowledge the problems built into modern masculinities. However, Banville's narratives recuperate the values of the masculinist aesthetic tradition that idealises the advancement of a male 'mind' or 'spirit' and reduces the feminine to the material other of this ideal.

This comparative/revenant structure is prepared for in the mysterious opening of *Eclipse*, which begins with the faintly biblical declaration "At first it was a form" (3) then describes the

dream-figure who will be associated with Cass as someone “fallen silently into step beside me, or inside me, rather, someone who was else, another, and yet familiar” (3). The formal nature of this abstract intuition suggests that perhaps its presence will be entirely non-material, a pure ideality. Yet its location inside Alex’s body unsettles this idea. In retrospect, knowing that this may be a vision of Cass, there is also a play on the word “familiar”: it suggests his daughter, a member of his family, but also a ‘spirit helper’ or guide. He is “stopped, struck, stricken by that infernal cold I have come to know so well, that paradisal cold” (3). This physical suspension by coldness recalls the coldness associated with the aesthetic of masochism, the sublime of immobility. The dialectical structure Alex hints at emphasises this suspension further. The “momentary occlusion of the light, as if something had plummeted past the sun” may be a “winged boy” or a “falling angel”; this complementary pairing again suggests the (failed) transformation between the material and the spiritual that is the basis of Alex’s predicament. Following this is the statement that he had “imagined such sorrows; such exaltations” (3), which again places the male narrator in a state of emotional ambivalence.

The abstract form described beside or “inside” Alex in the opening sentences subsequently materialises in the form of a female figure at an upstairs window:

I turned and looked back at the house and saw what I took to be my wife standing at the window of what was once my mother’s room. The figure was motionless, gazing steadily in my direction but not directly at me. What did she see? What was it she was seeing? I felt diminished briefly, an incidental in that gaze, dealt, as it were, a glancing blow or blown a derisive kiss. (3)

The figure in the window may only be “a shadow, woman-shaped” (3), but as a projection of Alex’s mind she plays a significant role. The re-framing of the question into the form “What was it she was seeing” stresses the question of the object she sees – in other words Alex’s place in her field of vision. She may be his mother, wife, or Cass, but in any case his position as



an image or object to others is intolerable. As with the painting in *The Book of Evidence*, the gaze of the other is diminishing not because it is a real person's sight but because it occupies a certain position within the specular structure arranged in order to dramatise the male narrator's limited perspective. The interruption or contestation of the narrator's perspective is, as I have already argued in a number of contexts, not simply a demonstration of the loss of absolute (textual) control over all perception and experience, but also a subtle means of re-establishing this control through the maintenance of a masochistic structure of desire.

The return to Alex's childhood home allows Banville to present Alex's mid-life crisis and early retirement from the stage through memories and hallucinations that overlap with reality. In particular, Lily is a living reminder of Cass, and is described as his "surrogate daughter". Like the girl Alex spied on, Lily is sometimes presented as a "marionette" or a stylised image whose static form indicates self-forgetting:

She gives herself up to inaction almost sensuously. She is a voluptuary of indolence . . . she will droop gradually to a stop, her arms falling limp, her cheek languishing toward her shoulder, her lips gone slack and swollen. At those moments of stillness and self-forgetting she takes on an unearthly aura, exudes a kind of negative radiance, a dark light. She reminds me of Cass, naturally (96).

Lily's presence in the house sparks memories of Cass because she imitates the static perfection of a statue or marionette form. This aestheticised suspension is the material opposite of the angelic woman Alex has been hallucinating. As with Althusser's 'transcendent' symbolic rose, the stasis of an artful death renews the desire associated with the romantic ideology of the symbol that seeks to unite signification with its world of referents.

At other times Lily provides an active and unbalancing influence on Alex. She is "discomfiting" (81) and "preys on [his] mind" (95) so that he feels

like an impotent satrap presented by his subjects with yet another superfluous concubine.

Her presence makes the house seem impossibly overcrowded. She has upset the balance of things. My phantom woman and her more phantasmal child were quite enough without this all too corporeal girl to dog my doings. I edge around her presence as though it might explode in my face at any moment (95).

This irritation is actually blamed on Lily's corporeality: Alex is much more comfortable with the disembodied forms he has been imagining or hallucinating. Lily's sexual attractiveness is frequently alluded to (for instance *E* 123); she and another girl are jokingly imagined as "my Justine and Juliette" (133). As in the opening lines of *Birchwood*, whose narrator likens himself to an "impotent casanova" (*B* 3), the metaphor of sexual impotence is closely linked with the problem of materiality as hostile to capture in writing. Such "impotence" of physical desire is intrinsic to Banville's formalist approach; this allows idealised figurations of the body to be valorized while corporeality is associated with the abject and threats to identity. Yet desire is often organised around the abject as well since it is through the de-centering of subjective agency and intentionality that Banville's fiction maintains its focus on the desire to reinstate a subjectivity anchored to a formal idealism. An example of this in *Eclipse* is the distasteful juxtaposition of the thorn popping out of Alex's hand in a "blob of pus" with the descriptions of masturbation over "antique smut" (*E* 52-3), the inherent racism of which Coughlan has noted (82).

The hallucinated woman, who seems to suggest Cass but is not her, is also presented in the terms of this formal ideal/material binary. She is, or has, a form: she is "the figure of a woman" (43) turning and handing something to a seated child. Alex only gets a glimpse but is struck by its "ordinariness" (*ibid.*) and feels, as is typical, "a sense of general suspension, as of things holding themselves in stillness" (*ibid.*). Yet Alex's response is immediately to notice "the sound of my own self, blood, lymph, labouring organs, making its low susurrus in my ears" (*E* 43). This sudden awareness of the workings of his body intensifies the aporia between ideal form and empirical or sensory experience and helps solidify the sense in which the hallucinated

woman is part of an expanded, fractured masculine identity.

The fact that Alex sees a woman and child foreshadows Cass's pregnancy and her own dreams of the loss of a child in *Shroud*. However, this pregnancy also resonates with the many references to "imaginative parturition" in Banville's novels from *The Book of Evidence* on. It is suggested in *Eclipse* in the subtle hint that the lodging house may have taken in women who were pregnant or who had recently had an abortion. Alex recalls a boy he befriended who stayed at the house, whose mother spent all day in bed and cried a lot. Quirke's question about a ghost haunting the house, and mention of a child and mother that died while living at the house, prompts Lily to explain his hinting: "'He means,' Lily said to me with ironic emphasis, 'someone that got pregnant. I, of course, don't know where babies come from.'" (129). The baby smuggling ring and backstreet abortions that form the backdrop in *Christine Falls* (2006), Banville's first novel under the pseudonym Benjamin Black, is perhaps foreshadowed here. The possibility that the family house was a refuge for pregnant mothers adds another layer of irony to Alex's retreat into the writing retreat of the house's garret. While the ubiquity of revenant female presences in *Eclipse* and *Shroud* suggests a kind of supererogatory identification with the simultaneous presence and absence involved in signification, especially with notions of 'literary desire' and the figuring of male creativity as a metaphoric birth, the reality of Alex's refuge may be based upon the practical consequences of sexual desire rather than being a formalist utopia based on Alex's imagination.

It is an irony that becomes rather cruel if we consider that Cass's pregnancy and suicide all seem to be a necessary prop for Alex's (and Axel's) protracted self examination. Ultimately, Cass leaves behind only the "aura . . . a faint flickering glow of almost-meaning" (211) that Alex can detect in her writings, and even this meaning revolves around "an absence . . . something, or someone, who has removed himself" (211). This emphasises the triangle in which Cass is

“shared” or exchanged between Alex and Axel, as in the exchange of marriage<sup>16</sup>. Although Alex’s final vision of Cass is undeniably joyful and seems to give way to a new, clearer perspective on his mourning, the description focuses only on her physical beauty and associations with art and mythology (213-4). However, despite the gift of the house that might seem to tie her into Alex’s nostalgic plans for the future, Lily at least seems to have her independence acknowledged, as she looks “out into the world, the great world, waiting for her” (214).

In *Shroud*, the relationship between the narrator and the key female figures is also set up through an abstract relationship that is framed as a challenge to the narrator’s voice—as well as his autonomy and identity—of the protagonist: “Who speaks? It is her voice, in my head. I fear it will not stop until I stop” (3). This initial formalist perception is, as so often, the male narrator’s preoccupation with a female other. Importantly, it also threatens that mental instability will overcome him (as has been noted already, this is a superficial concern – the controlled narrative voice is never really threatened). However, when the narrative focuses on Cass, her motivations tend to conform to Axel’s own.<sup>17</sup> When she first hears of him, he is “a configuration, a sort of template fitting itself to a need in her she had not known was there” (120); her relation to him mirrors the formalist intuition that guides Banville’s male narrators. Similarly, Axel’s books of literary criticism are “a voice calling to her, and her alone” (121). She contacts Axel because she has uncovered the secret of his identity and is in a position to reveal it to the world. Unsure of what she will do, she anticipates their meeting with a “not unpleasurable distress; it was the feeling she imagined of being newly pregnant” (32). A redemption narrative is set in motion when they meet and begin a relationship; she soon transforms into his lover and caregiver. In this role she is like Mama Vander’s pillbox – she is the “small precious thing” (6) the possession of which will redeem Axel. He speculates that “her

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<sup>16</sup> The stone bower Cass jumps from is, according to Alex’s guide book, a place where “newly-weds come directly after the marriage ceremony, so that the bride may fling her bouquet as a sacrifice to the seething waters below” (E 207). A faint echo of Althusser’s rose symbol and the splash of blood on Cass’s white dress may be detected here.

<sup>17</sup> Coughlan 94.

real purpose, [was] not to expose me and make a name for yourself at all, but rather to offer me the possibility of redemption” (6). Such a teleological description of their relationship—“her real purpose”—deliberately contrasts with the anti-humanist notion of a sublime “materialism” found in *Eclipse* and with Axel’s Nietzschean anti-foundationalist academic career. As in the Frames trilogy, the male protagonist will discover his own redemption through the sacrifice of a young woman. Layers of self-deprecation and irony, as well as numerous sardonic allusions to literary representations of violence, domination and sadism, do little to disguise the power imbalance that is constructed along gender lines in these narratives.

In *Shroud*, one of Cass’s roles is as the vehicle for Axel’s memories of Magda. For instance, in the scene where Axel and Cass are about to have sex for the first time, Axel recalls feeding Magda the pills that killed her. He describes how, carrying her upstairs, she spoke “bubbling little sighs . . . as if she were a drunken lover trying to whisper lewd endearments” (115). The process of recalling these memories involves allusions to or ruminations on violence, especially between men and women. Prior to this, Axel had become enraged after the failed attempt to view the apartment where Nietzsche lived during his last days in Turin. He implied a sense of complicity between Cass and the woman living in the apartment who denies that Nietzsche once lived there (or simply does not understand what Axel is asking her). This denial of a tour through the material surrounds of an intellectual history so central to Axel’s academic career makes him angry, though he is also drunk at the time. “I considered letting the front door swing shut in [Cass’s] face” (107), he writes, and likens Cass to “Electra astray in the city of tombs” (ibid.), associating her with mourning of a dead father and subsequent murderous revenge. Later, after he kisses Cass, Axel feels her looking at him with “Magda’s very gaze” (111). Besides the implication that both women are insane, this past-present superimposition emphasises the dynamics of interiorisation de Man associates with romantic ideology, which operates through the correlation of an external object with an “ideal content”. In the same way that Lily reminds Alex of Cass, Cass enables Axel to return to events from

his past in such a way as to emphasise a destiny of the masculine subject as having lost its subjective unity. The counter-memorial perspective he writes from continuously highlights the mismatch between the narrator's past and present experience, what Axel describes as "the sensation . . . of shifting slightly aside from myself, as if I were going out of focus and separating in two . . . seeming not so much a person as a contingency, misplaced and adrift in time" (68). Here, Axel's self-division is characterised in terms of a double vision that upsets any notion of singular, controlling subjectivity and also recalls the visual structures that work to the same end.

On Cass's side of things, there is a distinctly incestuous aspect to their relationship (Coughlan 94). Cass spurs Axel's confession of his role in Magda's demise, but Cass also hallucinates that her father, "a ghost of the living man" (129), is present while she is having sex with Axel. Yet the two memories, or hallucinations, are quite different, for Alex is the active party, appearing in the middle of shaving, like a ghostly Buck Mulligan, "sketching abstract diagrams on the air with the razor", and "always animated, always dominating, cutting and carving and moulding the world" (130). She notices a "bead of blood, the size of a ladybird, on his lip" (130) where Alex has cut himself, and seems to have thoughts that echo the preoccupations of Alex in *Eclipse*: "Body: that was a word she did not like . . . Vander at the end had spoken something in her ear, a hoarse grunt, ugly and urgent. He could break her in his arms, crush the life out of her" (S 131). Her relationship with her father seems to be at the centre of her relationship with Axel; despite being a scholar who has read all Axel's books, her interest in him is not intellectual, nor does she aim to expose his identity fraud. She finds a calling in looking after Axel, and readers may guess that this is a transference of affection for her father. Although Banville's novels are self-conscious, and perhaps imply some distance from the over-determined gender stereotypes they employ—both Cass and Magda (Magdalene) have names that announce they are types or figures of a patriarchal imaginary—they serve to maintain the aesthetic values that construct the feminine as passive and mentally unstable. By contrast, masculine activity, like

Alex's shaving, involves the shaping or stamping of form on the world.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the distinction between conceptual or ideal form and the physical body as a marker in the formalist masculine subject's self-narration is suggested by the title image in *Shroud* – the Turin relic itself. The afterimage of Christ's body as empirical proof of his spiritual survival and transcendence encapsulates the ideal that Banville's protagonists seek in a secularised form through the aesthetic. However, the shroud is a double absence, since Axel and Cass are unable to gain access to view it and it goes unseen for the entire novel. This is only fitting, as the redemptive possibility of Axel's confession is called into question by the suicide of Cass, and by Dr Zoroaster, whose testimony that the real Axel Vander was betrayed by a friend (which thereby implicates our narrator) threatens any credibility or sympathy Axel has built up. Kristina Kovacs's losing battle with cancer adds another sense of injustice as well – she too may soon be covered by a shroud just as Magda was.<sup>19</sup> A translation of the shroud into a symbol, an aesthetic redemption based in the "imperfect" medium of language, is equally appropriate, and strategic as a positioning of the masculine subject. The shroud as inaccessible transcendental signifier confirms the formal idealism of Banville's protagonists, and does so not as an unconscious element in the formation of the subject but as an integral part of their relation to power: the inaccessibility of order and unified meaning enables that meaning to continue to exist.

This translation into a compromised aesthetic which must be repeatedly renounced is also evident in the ambiguous final line of *Shroud*, which could refer to any of Magda, Cass or Kristina, the dead or dying women who surround Axel. The line echoes Lear's lament for Cordelia in *King Lear* (Coughlan 97), but is there also a nod towards Wallace Stevens' poem

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler has discussed the long history of *schema* (internal "mechanisms" such as the soul, the subject, etc.) that stamp or imprint a form upon matter (particularly the body) and thus cultivate it and maintain its place in the social and political order (1993:32-36). The cultural history of materiality usually associates such stamping with masculinity and unformed or raw matter with femininity.

<sup>19</sup> When the ambulance officers carry her downstairs, Axel notices "the sheet pulled over her face so tightly that I could see not only the outlines of her nose and mouth but even the protuberances of her eyes" (S 115).

“The Man on the Dump,” the final line of which reads “Where was it you first heard of the truth? The, the.” (Stevens 201-3). This allusion aligns the patriarch reformed through suffering and madness with the implication that truth is constructed through language and is multiple or relativistic. Banville’s version, however, repeats the feminine pronoun, “She. She.”, and thereby questions the reality of who the “she” refers to at the same time as recalling the demise of an absolute epistemology. This may imply that “she” is ultimately a mystery to Axel, or that she exists only insofar as his narrative has constructed her – which is accurate since there are so many ways in which Cass’s narrative is a supplement and reflection of Axel’s own aims and desires.

*Eclipse* and *Shroud* form a symmetrical pairing more complex than any previous example in Banville’s oeuvre. They are part of Banville’s focus on modern dualistic conceptions of reality arising out of philosophical idealist traditions in which the body is theorised as distinct from the mind or spirit. *Birchwood*, of course, started this off by demonstrating the grotesque return of the body when one tries to escape it through romantic idealist narratives and formalist patterning. In these texts, the revenant is built into the structure of the narrative and character relationships as well as being a thematic concern. The play between presence and absence dramatised through memory is central to the repetition of masculine subjectivity organised around the logic of sublime failure or misprision – Axel’s hallucinations of Cass, meditations on acting, Axel’s memories of Magda, Cass’s dreams, and the unviewable all exhibit this focus. The process of “shaping,” of “putting on personae” (*E* 3) is both Axel’s concern as an actor and the perennial problem Banville treats in writing fiction. The self-reflexive formalisation in Banville’s novels is didactic insofar as it demonstrates the “failure” to unify the material and ideal orders, yet it simultaneously holds out the possibility of reaching this idealised form. The “lessons” of aesthetic perception that de Man deplored in Schiller are here presented in utterly ironic terms, but are nevertheless put to the service of a redemption narrative that pulls back from the anti-humanist counteraesthetic moment in the sublime to re-assert a coherent



narrative subject – and it may be that the confessional genre encourages such didacticism. In any case, the structures Banville employs in this project are organised through relationships—sexual, filial, and platonic—between men and women, as well as through a range of traditional representations of masculinity and femininity, in order to articulate the model of desire upon which his fictions are built.

## Conclusion

John Banville's fiction has often been read as de-centering the subject in the way Copernicus's heliocentric theory de-centered the earth from its position at the centre of the universe. The analogy suggests that traditional assumptions of humanism have been displaced or 're-theorised' in his work. Partly on this basis, Banville's fiction is often described as postmodernist. Through its study of Banville's representations of masculinity, this thesis has sought to modify this view in an important way. If we accept that identity or subjectivity is discursively constructed—produced, that is, by our ways of talking and writing about it—rather than something prior to language that takes it up as an instrumental tool for the communication of already constituted thought, then our relationship to our self-representations can never be 'innocent' or purely 'factual.' Rather, narrative fiction such as Banville's can only be read with a view to the strategic or 'ideological' dimension of such self-representation.

The arguments made in this thesis about the structure of masculine subjectivity in Banville's fiction assume the 'constructedness' of narrative identities. Banville's preoccupation with stories, like that of Copernicus, which dramatise a loss of symbolic mastery over the world and the de-centering of a previously secure position of (masculine) rationality, should be understood as a strategic response to, rather than a simple reflection of, the changed understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and language after modernism. In a 1977 book review, Banville wrote that "we cannot unlearn the lessons of modernism . . . the novelist cannot go back to 'realism' and write as if nothing happened in the period between, say, James's *The Ambassadors* and Beckett's *The Unnameable*" (qtd. in Imhof 1989:10). For Banville, modernism is a decisive break with prior artistic traditions not because it made things new and produced a

revolution in thinking about art and society. Rather, in his account at least, it marks the point at which artistic experimentation leaves even its leading practitioners stranded, having lost the values they once relied upon, and wondering if perhaps there is a way back to the world they knew before. As Banville comments while contemplating the indifference of Joyce's work to its readers,

I am thinking of Modernism's famous and significant U-turns: of Picasso abruptly re-turning to figurative painting, leaving lesser figures to struggle amid the toppling masonry of cubism; of Stravinsky heading the charge back to Bach; of Schoenberg's astonishing Opus 43B; thinking too of Herman Broch's heroic attempt to transform the post-Joycean novel into a mode of knowledge, and, of course, of Yeats's magisterial stride across the wasteland. And finally I am thinking of Rilke's lament in the *Elegies*:

More than ever  
things we can live with are falling away . . .

Can we live with [*Finnegans*] *Wake*? (Banville 1982:67)

Banville's attempts to define what he feels is 'unsatisfactory' about Joyce in his articles "The Dead Father," quoted above, and "Survivors of Joyce" (Banville 1990), reveal his uneasiness with those elements of modernism that sought to disestablish once and for all a necessary connection between humanism and art. His list of "Modernist U-turns" reminds us of the way his own science tetralogy thematises and emplots a need to return to some kind of shared human reality. More distantly, it is possible to detect the "U-turns" of perspective that feature in many of Banville's later works, and which prompt the male narrator to seriously re-evaluate his identity. This suggests that there is a deep connection between Banville's representation of masculinity and his relation to modernist art.

The admiration Banville shows for these male artists who turn back from the brink of formal experimentation to achieve a renewal of a comprehensible “mode of knowledge” or to articulate “things we can live with” inevitably conflicts with the de-centering of subjectivity that his fiction also insists upon. After all, the expulsion of the narrative subject from a position of ideal perspective is evident in Gabriel Swan’s mathematics, in the mis-recognition of an authentic being in art, or the confusion between art and ‘reality’ in *The Book of Evidence*, or in the ‘performative’ identity of Alex Cleave and the crisis he experiences without knowing what triggered it. The masochistic reading of Banville’s fiction undertaken in this thesis has shifted the emphasis of interpretation in relation to these events by arguing that all the negative qualities endured by Banville’s men, such as failure, fragmentation, absence and inauthenticity, are strategic disavowals of an idealised masculine subjectivity that is guaranteed through the logic of the sublime and the model of desire inherent in masochism.

The ironic attitude towards every attempt to access the ‘real’ in Banville’s novels is an acknowledgment that a mediated reality is the only possible reality. However, Banville does not, to borrow Lyotard’s phrase, abandon the “solace of good forms,” and embrace postmodern culture; rather, he maintains a strict formalism linked to the sublime that posits a ‘way out,’ or some access to unmediated essence as a perpetual possibility. Therefore, this thesis reads Banville’s attempt to preserve an image of masculinity—a singular, rational intellect, comparable to the ideal modern artist or philosopher—through the forms of negation that, paradoxically ensure its survival, namely, the aesthetics of the sublime and the gender politics of masochism.

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Chapter One established the strong links between the aesthetics of the sublime and a conservative, masculinist gender politics. Both Burke’s and Kant’s major contributions to

theories of the sublime justify a patriarchal power structure through the ostensibly natural field of aesthetic perceptions and judgments. As further support to the work of Nick Mansfield on the links between masochism and the sublime, it shows how the ambivalent relation to power highlighted by Althusser's notion of interpellation and Butler's account of "passionate attachment" can become a pre-condition for the masochistic recuperation of power.

Mansfield's understanding of masochism extends the negotiation of an aesthetic agreement linking individual and society in the sublime, for it "crosses and recrosses the ostensible boundary between psychopathology and culture, sometimes operating as a scientific category, and sometimes as a metaphor for representation and politics" (ix). It is mostly in terms of the latter, metaphoric sense of masochism that this thesis has discussed Banville's portrayals of masculinity, but it is clear from what happens to characters like Gabriel Swan and Freddie Montgomery that their literal suffering is important to their writing in a psychological sense as well. The scope of Mansfield's analysis of masochism is such that everything from everyday power relations between individuals to global patterns in cultural politics is potentially implicated. As Chapter One shows, references indicating the enjoyment of pain are not uncommon in Banville's work, but the real significance of masochism is as a metaphor for the turning away from power by men as a way of ensuring they do not lose it entirely.

Mansfield's significant departure from Deleuze's seminal account of Sacher-Masoch's fiction consists of his emphasis on the conservative impulse within masochism, which he does in part by linking it to the sublime. Deleuze's approach to masochism was revolutionary because he made a literary and philosophical study of Sacher-Masoch's fiction, rather than reducing it to a psychological schema. However, because Deleuze argued masochism was a subversion of the law of the father and a re-writing of psychoanalysis with the cruel, oral mother as the new central embodiment of authority, Mansfield argued that, in fact, Deleuze's account re-names the players but leaves the essential story of the male masochist's return to power unchanged.

The elaboration of a masochistic, masculine sublime underlying Banville's representation of men in this thesis has followed two threads that have sometimes crossed paths and sometimes had little to do with each other. These threads are Banville's representation of the past as counter-memory, and the important distinction derived from the European philosophical tradition between mind and matter or, in a slightly different sense, between form and an unformed materiality or 'substance.' The former shows how the historical dimension can be conceived as sublime through the disavowal of historical realism to adequately present the real. The latter, which Chapter One explains through the work of Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray, derives from Butler's contention that the ideal of rational masculinity is constructed through a specific form of crisis in which the image of the masculine body must be dematerialised, in order to reconcile it with the idea of pure mind or ideality. Of course, this dematerialisation is not possible, and results in a crisis in which self division and projection of the threatening aspects of the body are projected elsewhere. In Banville's fiction this ideal 'body of reason' appears, I argue, as a perpetual crisis structured through the sublime, and produces grotesque disavowals of embodiment such as the character of Mammy in *Mefisto*.

Chapters Two and Three explored the role of masculinity in ostensibly 'historical' narratives, not just as an adjunct to an 'epistemological' reading of the ideas they represent, but as a way of re-appraising the relationship between de-centred subjectivity, power and desire. As is well established, Banville's science tetralogy applies twentieth-century perspectives to the ideas of Copernicus, Kepler and Newton in order to concentrate on the crisis that leads each of them to realise that their intellectual work is built upon false assumptions. Chapter Two revised the way Copernicus and Kepler are understood by moving from a view of their theories as 'heroic' or 'redemptive' failures to reading them masochistically, and thus acknowledging the implicit sense of enjoyment and self-control they achieve. The stark contrast between the chaos of the physical world and the ideal realm of the heavens in Doctor Copernicus offers a particularly striking instance of sublimation through which his intellectual life can be seen as

a means of retaining or recuperating power.

The opposition of a “counter-memorial” writing to historical discourse is most fully explored in Chapter Three. This chapter first takes issue with Conor McCarthy’s reading of Banville as a “metahistorian” (120) who reflects the state of Irish historiography of the 1970s. Although Banville’s engagement with themes from Irish history in which the narration of past events becomes “radically perspectival, subjective, [and] partial” (McCarthy 121) might be read as a corroboration of revisionist historiography, my chapter argued that because this loss of an ideal historical perspective is linked so closely to the dramatisation of masculinity in both *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter*, it should instead be read in terms of the misunderstandings and “willful blindness” (NL 96) of a masculine subject arranging a sublime possibility of truth through their seemingly endless string of inventions and errors. The reading of the inheritance plot in *Birchwood* as a dramatisation of different aspects of a single, conflicted masculine subject also relies on elements of historical context in order to make any sense, but I argue that these are ultimately subordinated to the resolution in which Gabriel overcomes Michael (who fades away) and gains the house. The inheritance is not an inheritance of property, title, or masculine authority, but the preservation of a space of writing.

*Mefisto* is perhaps the strangest of Banville’s novels, for it features an extremely rigid formal structure in which almost every character is mirrored either within the novel itself or in Goethe’s *Faust*, of which could be considered a contemporary adaptation. I show that *Mefisto*’s binary structure is one of the clearest examples of the way in which the masochistic subject is presented through self-division. Gabriel is divided himself, for he has a dead twin, but the rest of the characters in the novel are aspects of Gabriel’s fragmented world too. The second part of Chapter Four develops a reading of *Mefisto* through Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of faciality, a binary “machine” that sorts identities according to the patriarchal values of Western metaphysics. Faciality is, like the supercomputer Gabriel works on in the second half of *Mefisto*, a systematic circumscription of the manifold differences and particularities of

the world into a binary code. Using this reading of faciality, the chapter shows how Gabriel is disfigured and suffers, but is eventually reborn as a version of the masochistic “new man,” so that he can begin to rebuild his mathematics once again.

Chapter Five showed how the logic of the masochistic sublime applies to Banville’s art trilogy. The reading of *The Book of Evidence* as an elaborate ‘excuse’ in the confessional tradition of Rousseau demonstrates how the impossibility of pinning down the truth of performative language turns his crime and imprisonment into the enabling condition of his narrative. The addition of the aporetic relation between visual and verbal modes of representation further complicates this ‘excuse,’ for I show that Freddie makes his inadequacy before the illusion of otherness into a possible reason for killing Josie Bell. I discuss some of the ethical perspectives on Freddie’s confessional narrative and conclude that his confessional performance of selfhood is in fact further entrenched by every effort he makes at ‘honest’ representation.

In contrast to the impossible presence of the painting which Freddie is unable to describe adequately in *The Book of Evidence*, the second part of Chapter Five demonstrated how *Ghosts* employs an opposite effect: instead of keeping the world of the artwork entirely separate from Freddie, in *Ghosts* Banville sets up an ontological “indifference,” through which it becomes impossible to decide whether the figures in the painting or the characters of the novel’s represented world should take precedence. Freddie is surrounded by people who are also figures in a painting, and I discuss the implications of this device through reference to notions of haunting, mourning and the deconstruction of the frame undertaken by Derrida in *The Truth In Painting*. *Ghosts* creates multiple avenues for Freddie to imagine himself in relation to these others who never definitively escape the confines of the canvas, and it thereby maintains an ultimately self-referential drama internal to his imagination.

The section dealing with *Athena* is the culmination of the ‘art trilogy’ and of the notion that Freddie must atone for the “failure of imagination” (BE 215) that allowed him to kill. In his relationship with A., however, Freddie finds that his desires always lead to further mis-



recognitions of his own perspective, both as narrator of the text and as an art critic. The sexual relationship between Freddie and A. displays some features readers will recognise as masochistic, but they are crafted in subtle ways that indicate how Freddie's desire for A. is an 'internal' relation to his own projected desires for self-presence and an 'ideal' visual perspective.

Chapter Six considers the influence of Louis Althusser and Paul de Man on the way *Eclipse* and *Shroud* present the masculine subject. De Man's complex reading of Kant is linked to Alex Cleave's echo of the marionettes in *Mefisto* and Kleist in order to show how the notion of an irreducible materiality cannot escape being expressed through figures of the body. This echoes the way Alex and Axel are both haunted by memories of a woman whose absence and ghostly return enables their narratives to maintain a structure of partial resolution and renewed despair.

The primary aim of Banville's de-centering of the masculine subject and the problematisation of representation is not simply to reflect a contemporary paradigm of postmodern identity. Rather, his fiction intensifies effects of self-estrangement and destabilisation as an active response to the rejection of a humanistic, self-present subject. Gender difference is one of the most significant of the binary structures Banville's novels invest their energy in, since it is through gender difference and traditional models of heterosexual male desire that the conservative politics of masochism, and the equally conservative aesthetic of the sublime, operate. Through these two discourses, Banville creates narratives of desire that, like Kafka's letters to Felice, or Werther's idealisations of Charlotte, create a self-sufficient narrative of masculine desire without end.

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